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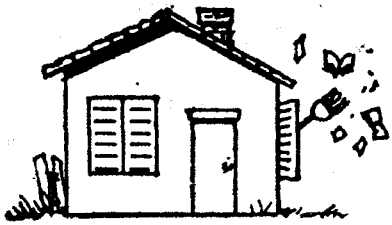

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a NEW story by

JAMES POWELL

Another of James Powell's absolutely charming stories of San Sebastiano . . . and sharpen your wits: clever, crafty, cunning, this Louis Tabarin, diamond merchant extraordinaire; when Tabarin wanted a diamond necklace for his antique-jewelry collection—even if it was the last of a family's heirlooms and with a potent legend to protect it—he left no stone (no pun intended) unturned . . .

THE GOBINEAU NECKLACE

by JAMES POWELL

IN THE RIVIERA PRINCIpality of San Sebastiano the name Tabarin et Cie means diamonds of the first water and pearls of great price. Louis Tabarin's jewelry shop on the rue Mazeppa had brought him not only wealth but entry into the best society where he was admired for his impeccable sense of style and envied for his air of bored imperturbability. And yet here he was, stopped dead in his tracks and his mouth ajar, on the Opera's broad marble and onyx staircase as the intermission crowd pushed by him on both sides. Below, just inside the refreshment salon, was the most exquisite diamond necklace the renowned jeweler had ever seen.

Tabarin moved closer. The salon was crowded and he was able to stand almost next to the diamonds and the weak-chinned little woman who wore them. The stones were all six-sided, an old-fashioned cut which the ancients believed brought good luck. The setting was superb: Sixteenth Century, definitely from Rotterdam and probably by van Gelder.

As Tabarin watched, the woman was presented with a glass of punch by a short man with sad bulging eyes and a thin black mustache. Together they were a study in gentility gone to seed: his cigarette holder was gold-inlaid ivory, but his brand,

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Grand Moguls, was the cheapest; her dress—a dusty mauve with mutton-chop sleeves—belonged to quite another age. And yet the necklace was worth at least three-quarters of a million francs—even more to Tabarin who was a passionate collector of antique jewelry.

Tabarin admired the necklace until the sound of a buzzer announced the final act. Reluctantly he returned to his box, resolved to have the necklace for his collection. Of course, as he knew from past experience, acquiring it might prove to be a delicate matter. More often than not, the direct approach, the blunt offer to buy, proved disastrous. Once Tabarin had coveted a Twelfth Century episcopal ring, the last valuable possession of a certain Lady Milgrain who lived in a damp bed-sitting room in a squalid house run by an immense ox of a woman with bad teeth. Several visits to Lady Milgrain had failed. "As the last of my line I intend to take the ring with me to the grave," she told him over weak tea and broken cookies. "Perhaps a tradesman would find that hard to understand," she had added with a little smile.

But that particular story had a satisfactory ending. A few months later Lady Milgrain passed away in her sleep. It was the landlady who found her body. So when the ring was not among the dead woman's effects, Tabarin knew where to go. With a wink and a poke in the ribs the landlady had sold him the ring for a fraction of its value.

Outside the Opera, Tabarin located the couple again just as they were getting into a cab, she wearing a woolen shawl over her shoulders, he a plastic raincoat. Tabarin followed them across the Pont des Coeurs and into the once fashionable Faubourg St. Médor. Their destination was the Hotel Sébastopol, a narrow, decaying structure wedged in between a shuttered drug store and a pastry shop.

As Tabarin entered the lobby the couple's feet were just disappearing up the wrought-iron cage of the elevator shaft. The concierge came out of a room behind the hotel desk. "May I help the gentleman?" he asked.

"I thought I recognized the man and woman who just arrived," said Tabarin.

"You mean the Count and Countess de Gobineau," said the concierge, throwing his shoulders back proudly as if to say, "Imagine them staying in a hotel like this," and then shrugging as if to add, "It is

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a pity they've fallen so low."

Tabarin started to go. But then he turned back and dropped a business card on the desk. "The Countess placed a necklace in the hotel safe, did she not?" he asked.

"I was sure I knew you from somewhere, Mr. Tabarin," said the concierge, pulling a racing form from under the counter. "The Beaulieu racetrack. I too am a follower of the sport of kings. I—"

"I would like to examine that necklace," said Tabarin, laying a banknote on the counter.

The concierge drew back. "Ah, no," he said firmly. "Maybe we aren't the Hotel Prince Adalbert, but still, our guests have rights!"

"I admire your discretion," said Tabarin. "It should be rewarded." He tapped the banknote. "This plus a sure thing at Beaulieu tomorrow."

The concierge bit his lip and looked nervously to the left and right. Then he motioned Tabarin behind the counter and into the back room. He watched from the doorway while Tabarin examined the necklace diamond by diamond with a pocket glass. The diamonds were magnificent—each stone without flaw, and all drawn together in a setting at once bold and delicate.

"Trottoir in the third," said Tabarin, returning the necklace to its green leather box and the box to the concierge. "And you needn't mention this to the Count and Countess."

Among the inhabitants of the fringe of San Sebastiano high society was Madame Olga Knapp, a cynical, aggressive widow who supported herself on commissions earned for bringing customers to the more expensive shops. Tabarin's question surprised her. Yes, as a matter of fact, she had met the Count and Countess de Gobineau at a lavish dinner party thrown by the Bile King—her contemptuous nickname for an American patent-medicine tycoon with a childlike reverence for titled nobility. But Madame Knapp dismissed the couple with a wave of her hand.

"The Countess didn't say 'boo' all evening," she said. "And the Count added nothing to the occasion but a hearty appetite. A pathetic couple. I find pathetic people a bore, don't you?"

Tabarin left the question unanswered. "I'm having a few friends over for drinks this evening. Perhaps you would care to join us, Madame Knapp," he said.

An invitation to Tabarin's house was a rare and coveted

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honor. Madame Knapp was quick to accept. "Excellent," said Tabarin coldly. "And perhaps your friends the Count and Countess de Gobineau would care to join us as well." This, his tone made clear, was the price of her invitation.

The evening began tediously. Nothing Tabarin said could put the timid little Countess at her ease in the presence of the rich, the famous, and the witty. As for the Count, what few opinions Tabarin could get him to utter were painfully mundane.

Finally Tabarin decided to make his move. General Klostermann, retired Chief of Staff of the army of San Sebastiano had just launched off on his favorite topic: the nature of war following the nuclear holocaust when, Klostermann believed, the sabre charge would come into its own again. He liked to illustrate this point down on his hands and knees using lead uhlans and spahis which he carried with him everywhere in a large cardboard box.

Tabarin chose this moment to show de Gobineau his study, including his shelf of rare first editions ("I'm not much of a reader," said the Count), his collection of erotic engravings ("What'll they think of next," said the Count), and his admirable still-life of oranges, apples, and cheese by Marbeuf ("Cheese gives me heartburn," said the Count).

"But antique jewelry is my great weakness," said Tabarin, revealing the wall safe behind the Marbeuf. "Usually I keep my collection at the shop. My insurance company prefers it that way." Tabarin drew out a box containing a pendant, broach, and signet ring. "But now and then, much to their dismay, I bring a few pieces home to enjoy them at my leisure."

Tabarin waited. What could be more natural than for the Count to mention his antique diamond necklace? When he did not, the jeweler had to snap his fingers. "Ah," he exclaimed, "I knew I had seen you some place before. Last night at the Opera. As I recall, your wife was wearing a rather unusual antique necklace."

"The necklace is beautiful, isn't it?" de Gobineau said a bit sadly. "The last of our family heirlooms."

"I suppose you've had it appraised?" asked Tabarin in an off-hand way.

The Count sighed. "Pointless," he said. "Regretfully I can never sell it."

"Because it's encumbered in some way?" asked Tabarin,

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straining to keep the apprehension out of his voice.

The Count shook his head. "Because of the family legend," he said. "The Gobineau necklace was lost at sea during the Eighth Crusade, stolen by marauding Yorkshiremen during the Hundred Years War, sold to pay off creditors under the Sun King, and so on and so on. But always it came back to us. Always. For example, the family fled to Russia during the French Revolution, but not before a local Jacobin leader had confiscated the necklace in the name of the Republic. This Jacobin later fled the Girondists across the Rhine and into the Duchy of Altdorf where he was promptly executed as a spy and the necklace was added to the Duke's treasury. It was later returned to France as part of German reparations following the Battle of Jena. Seven years later in Odessa my great-great-grandfather won the necklace at cards from a Cossack officer who claimed to have found it in baggage abandoned by Napoleon in his retreat from Moscow. So you see, knowing that the necklace must come back to me, how could I in good conscience sell it?"

"Not even for a million francs?" said Tabarin flatly.

The Count smiled. "I'm sorry," he said.

Tabarin didn't press the point. Nor did he give up. He was reminded of the Baron Haegg who had an ancient emerald clasp he refused to sell. After all, it had been in his family for generations. And the Baron's income was adequate for a sensible, temperate man. Which was what Haegg had been, until Tabarin introduced him to the voluptuous Magda Schmettering, sometime model, sometime movie starlet. Well, the bounteous Magda would be wasted on the Count. But there were other ways.

Later when the other guests were taking their leave, Tabarin drew the Count aside. Protesting that the evening was still young, he invited the Count and his wife to the Casino.

The Count raised an eyebrow. "We never never gamble," he said.

"I'd hardly expect my guests to risk their own money," laughed Tabarin. "I, of course, will provide the stakes. You might find it interesting."

The Count weighed the invitation thoughtfully. "Perhaps I would," he agreed.

Three days later Tabarin was offering the Count a chair in his office. "And how is your charming wife?" he asked.

The Count leaned forward with a conspiratorial smile.

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"I'm afraid she half suspects the reason for my visit," he said. "She's waiting for me in your showroom."

"Then this isn't a social call?" said Tabarin smoothly.

The Count was carrying his plastic raincoat over one arm. He drew a green leather box from the pocket and set it on Tabarin's desk. The jeweler examined the necklace carefully with his loupe, pretending to see it for the first time, impressed once more by its dazzling beauty. "I assume you've reconsidered selling," he said.

"No," said the Count. "I've already explained why that is impossible." He cleared his throat. "First, Mr. Tabarin, let me thank you for introducing me to the first great passion of my life. Some men are lucky at roulette; others are not. I've discovered that I am one of the lucky ones."

"Then you've been winning at the Casino?" asked Tabarin uneasily.

The Count smiled broadly and nodded. "That is, until yesterday when I encountered a losing streak. Quite temporary, of course. But I've exhausted all my available funds."

"I see," said Tabarin, relieved.

"I knew you'd understand," said the Count. "So I would like to borrow one hundred thousand francs from you, using the necklace as security. And with the stipulation that I will forfeit the necklace if I cannot repay the money by the end of the month."

Tabarin couldn't believe his ears.

The Count nodded emphatically. "Yes," he said, "why shouldn't I force my luck a bit? Since I can't really lose the necklace—I explained our family legend, didn't I?—then by gambling with money borrowed on it I'm bound to win." He smiled at his own clever logic and tapped his temple.

For a brief moment Tabarin pitied the Count. But a fool had no right to such a magnificent necklace. He quickly drew up their agreement in the form of a receipt for the diamonds and was just about to write out the check when his secretary came to the door. She said the Countess wanted to speak to her husband. In fact, the Countess was right behind her, craning to look into the office.

Tabarin quickly snapped the green leather lid over the necklace. In the next moment the Count was on his feet and had dropped his raincoat over the box. "What is it, Florence?" he said sharply.

"Alfred," said the Countess, "the salespeople have shown me

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so many expensive things. I'm sure they expect me to buy something."

"In a moment, my dear," said the Count.

Tabarin's secretary closed the door, but not before she reminded him he was late for an appointment. He made out the check and handed it to the Count, who had picked up his raincoat. "If you hurry you can still make the bank before it closes," the jeweler said. "In fact, it's on my way. Let me drop you there."

With a final admiring glance at the necklace Tabarin left it with his secretary, instructing her to place it in the vault.

That evening there was the opening of a new art gallery on the rue de Bégat. Afterward Tabarin dined with a group of friends at a Tripolitanian restaurant of which San Sebastiano had several, all throwbacks to its Nineteenth Century fling at empire in North Africa. It was someone else at the table who suggested a visit to the Casino.

So they arrived, a handsome, laughing group. To Tabarin's surprise the Count was not there. Surely he hadn't lost the money that quickly. Gautier, the steward, shrugged. He hadn't seen the Count all day. Tabarin frowned. Had the Count abandoned his crazy scheme?

There was no way out of it, Tabarin had to call the Hotel Sébastopol. The concierge informed him that the Count and Countess had checked out late that afternoon, leaving no forwarding address.

"Have you taken ill, sir?" asked Gautier, as Tabarin put down the receiver.

Each time the night watchman limped by the office doorway on his rounds he shook his head at the sight of Tabarin, jaw clenched, staring down at a necklace on his desk. The necklace was a fake. The Count had pulled a switch, probably when his wife had come to the door. The money wasn't important. The fact that the little con man had taken him wasn't important. But Tabarin was desperate to have the real necklace back. And by the first light of day a plan had taken shape in his mind.

Not far from the Marché St. Nicholas or Thieves Market was the Café Dureville, the dismal habitat of sleepy night people squinting against the early morning sun. Sitting in the corner was Babar the Elegant, a third-rate burglar and safecracker with a weakness for shot-silk suits, flowered shirts, and silver ties. Babar had a head

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cold. He hunched his broad shoulders over a glass of hot grog, inhaled the fumes deeply and said, "In deals to defraud the insurance boys the customary split is fifty-fifty."

"My reasons for wanting this done do not involve insurance," said Tabarin. "I'll give you five hundred francs now. There'll be another two thousand for you inside the wall safe."

Babar dipped a sugar cube in the grog and sucked on it thoughtfully. "One thousand now," he said.

"Agreed," said Tabarin. Then he hurried off to the photographer's studio where he met Magda Schmettering who was still grumpy from being wakened before noon. She had brought the bikinis he had requested. Tabarin made his choice carefully. Then, while she was changing, he explained to the photographer exactly what he wanted. Magda posed for the picture with all the radiance of a woman who believes the necklace she is wearing is worth a million francs.

And that was that. Now all Tabarin had to do was tell his secretary that he was taking the Gobineau necklace home with him that night.

By afternoon of the next day the theft of the diamond necklace from the Tabarin residence was front-page news all over Europe. What editor could resist running that picture of the necklace worn by a bikinied Magda which Tabarin had supplied to the wire services? Even the police inspector, after clucking over the pierced wall safe, had commandeered a second copy of the photo for his personal file. And Ortalon, the investigator for Gibraltar Insurance, when he was finished scolding Tabarin for keeping a necklace worth a million francs in a "glorified breadbox," had requested an extra copy of the photo and Magda's phone number. "In these cases," he told Tabarin, "we always question the last person to wear the stolen item."

Tabarin sat back and waited. If the Count fell for his little trick, if he believed that the fake necklace had been stolen before Tabarin discovered the switch, then he would be hurrying back to San Sebastiano. "I've come to repay that little loan and redeem my necklace, Mr. Tabarin," he would say with an innocent smile. "A theft? Why, no, I hadn't heard of any theft. I am overcome. Even though I know you will make good the loss, how can a mere million francs replace a family heirloom?"

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Then Tabarin would produce the fake necklace and offer the Count a simple choice: either he would go to jail for fraud—and how many more of his victims would step forward when the story hit the papers?—or he would sell the real necklace to Tabarin at the jeweler's price. A carefully calculated price, not so low that the Count would prefer a few years in jail or so high that it wouldn't hurt. Tabarin wanted the swindler to know he was being swindled.

Tabarin was anticipating the pleasure of that encounter as he reached his door that evening. Suddenly there was a loud sneeze and Babar the Elegant emerged from the shadows. Babar had read the newspapers. "You trying to muzzle the ox that grinds the grain, Mr. Tabarin?" he demanded. "I told you if it was a caper to take the insurance boys that I get half."

"Patience, Babar," said Tabarin. "In a day or two you'll see it wasn't that at all."

But the Count didn't appear the next day or the day after that. Obviously he suspected a trick of some kind. Yet sooner or later he would have to come. Tabarin imagined him like a wild animal slowly approaching a trap, wary and nervous but drawn by the overpowering lure of the bait.

By the morning of the third day Tabarin was tense and expectant. To his annoyance his first visitor was Ortalon. The insurance investigator announced grandly that Gibraltar, famous on two continents for promptly satisfying customers, was once more to justify that reputation. Tabarin cursed to himself. He wanted the necklace, not Gibraltar's million francs which he obviously couldn't accept. So now he would have to admit to a fool like Ortalon that he, Louis Tabarin, had been taken in, outwitted, by a con man.

Tabarin started to speak. But Ortalon raised a hand for silence and lay a garland of light on Tabarin's desk. The Gobineau necklace! Trembling, Tabarin examined it stone by stone under his loupe. The diamonds were real. This was the original necklace. "But how—?" asked Tabarin.

"Last night we were contacted by the thief who offered to sell the necklace back to us for half a million francs," said Ortalon. "And now, if you'll just sign this receipt—"

Tabarin signed the paper quickly. In his bewilderment only one thing was clear: the genuine Gobineau necklace was in his hands again. Suddenly his office had filled up with shouting reporters and pushing

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photographers. "I took the liberty of breaking the story to the press. Good publicity for you—and for Gibraltar," said Ortalon.

When the insurance investigator and the last of the reporters had left, Tabarin tried to shake off the blind spots from the flashbulbs and struggled to order his thoughts. But events were moving too fast. The phone rang. Babar the Elegant had heard the news over the radio. Was Tabarin trying to cheat him out of his share of the half million? If so, Babar threatened to make a deal with the police and put Tabarin behind bars for a long time. The jeweler was quick to promise Babar his quarter million. After all, the necklace was cheap at the price.

Tabarin had just put down the phone when his secretary announced the Count de Gobineau. The Count took a seat and then he looked at the surprised jeweler and smiled. In one swift moment Tabarin knew what the little man was going to say. Nevertheless he waited for the words. That gave him a few more moments to hold the necklace in his hands.

The Count lit a Turkish cigarette and nodded at the diamonds. "I see you've been expecting me, Mr. Tabarin," he said. "Yes, I've come to redeem my necklace. You see, last night I came into a considerable sum of money."

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a Sheriff Bill Eldon SHORT NOVEL by

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

complete in this issue

There were forces in Rockville—the political bigwig and one of the newspaper publishers and other leading citizens—who wanted to oust 70-year-old Sheriff Bill Eldon. Despite Eldon's popularity, they considered the sheriff an old fogy in his crime-fighting methods—an old fossil who didn't know "modern scientific stuff." But Sheriff Eldon, with his slow drawl and whimsical sense of humor, with his warmth and kindness, and especially with his understanding of the townspeople in particular and of people in general, had his own detective method—a method that has never grown old or old-fashioned, that is always as new as the latest electronic gadget. He knew that the solutions to the deepest mysteries of life lay not in physical clues (notwithstanding the title of this story!) but in the hearts and minds of people, in human nature and human character . . .

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THE CLUE OF THE RUNAWAY BLONDE

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

COLD AFTERNOON SUNlight made a carpet of long shadows back of the eucalyptus trees along the road as Sam Beckett opened the gate of the old Higbee place and drove his tractor into the eighty-acre field.

Things had been moving swiftly. Only the night before, the Higbee heirs had finally quit squabbling long enough to agree on a selling price. John Farnham, the realtor, had made a hurried trip to see Beckett the next morning. Within a few hours Beckett had gone over the property again, and the heirs had signed on the dotted line, the money went into title escrow, and Sam turned his horses into the Higbee place to pasture. Now he was starting plowing. He'd work until midnight, or longer if he didn't get too sleepy.

Out in the center of the field the old homestead was hemmed in by big shade trees. The dirt road ran to it in a diagonal line from the gate. But Beckett had no use for the big rambling house. It would cost more to renovate it than it was worth.

He lowered the plow and started up the tractor. As he plowed up roads and green sod with utter impartiality, the rich black soil rolled out in smooth billowing streams. The welcome smell of moist, fertile earth filled his nostrils.

Low sullen clouds drifted by overhead and to the east. Only in the west, where a wind from the ocean was temporarily pushing back the heavy clouds, was there a strip of blue sky. And the setting sun, glinting through under the clouds, turned the lower dragging wisps of moisture to a reddish purple which held a trace of orange, a color peculiar to wintry sunsets in Southern California.

The monotony of the tractor's motor, the steady strain of watching the furrow, lulled Sam Beckett into a state of half hypnotism where minutes marched by unnoticed.

The long shadows dissolved in dusk. Sam Beckett switched on the headlights and kept going. His eyes were fixed on the strip between grass and

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plowed earth, keeping it lined up just to the left of the right front wheel.

The chill night air flowed past his legs and stung his cheeks. His hands grasped the wheel until the knuckles felt numb, but his eyes remained automatically fixed on that slowly moving strip of ground, green on one side, black on the other.

The horses he had let out to pasture seemed unusually restless, because of the new environment, the green grass and the springy soil, perhaps. They galloped and snorted, chasing each other around the field. At times they plunged over into the heavy going of the plowed land.

Over at Beckett's place a cow was pleading for the return of her calf, an intermittent, mournful bellowing repeated at regular intervals.

Sam Beckett paid no attention to these things. He kept himself absorbed with his plowing, grinding steadily around the field, turning neat, straight furrows.

Somewhere back of the clouds was a moon, a day or so past the full. After it came up, enough light filtered through the cloud-bank to disclose the weird outlines of objects in a colorless, ghostly world.

Something over there on the right looked like a sack of potatoes.

Sam Beckett jerked his head, rubbed his eyes, looked again. Then he pushed out the clutch and reduced the motor to idling speed. He climbed stiffly down from the seat and stumbled over the furrows toward the object, expecting it to disappear at any moment, an optical illusion of the night and the fatigue of too much work.

But the object didn't disappear. As Beckett approached, it seemed darker and more solid. Beckett saw a pair of high-heeled shoes, legs, a skirt, somewhat disarranged—and then he was kneeling by the side of the limp body of a young woman lying face down in the freshly plowed earth.

"Hey!" Beckett shouted, his ears dulled by the after-noise of the tractor engine. "What's the matter?"

He touched her. She was warm to his touch, but there was a peculiar, inanimate lack of response, and Beckett suddenly withdrew his hand.

The hand felt sticky and seemed dark in the weak moonlight filtering through the cloud-bank.

Abruptly Sam Beckett found himself running back toward the tractor. He climbed to the seat, raised the plow, and turned the tractor around.

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Opening the throttle he started jolting and lurching over the freshly plowed furrows toward the gate, his mind trying to shake off the weariness of his physical fatigue, trying to adjust itself to this startling development.

Even then, it didn't occur to him to notice the exact time.

Sheriff Bill Eldon finished the office work on his desk, rolled a cigarette, and settled back in the creaky swivel chair to glance through the paper before going home. Occasionally he worked nights at his office in the courthouse, and he always remained late if his wife's sister, Doris, was a visitor at the house. Doris was there tonight.

The sheriff could get along all right with Doris because he made it a rule to get along all right with everyone. But he was careful to take her in small doses. Doris felt that her brother-in-law was far too "easygoing," and she lost no chance to air her convictions. She had a suspicious nature, a hard, driving personality. Her shrewd, glittering little eyes were as impudently appraising as those of a bluejay, and her tongue was constantly in motion.

The passing years had turned the sheriff's hair white. They had accented his slow drawl and his whimsical sense of humor. These things were a constant source of irritation to his energetic sister-in-law, who thought a man should have some "git-up-an'-git" to him. Of late she had been referring to him as "the old man" whenever she had occasion to mention him. This was on an average of a dozen times an hour.

The sheriff skimmed through the headlines of the *Gazette.* The Higbee heirs had worked out a partial compromise, he noticed, by which title could be conveyed to the old homestead. It was reported that a sale was in process of negotiation.

Bill Eldon knew that the purchaser must be Sam Beckett, who owned the eighty acres directly across from the Higbee place.

The sheriff browsed through the front page, turned to the inside page and read the "Personal Mention Column" with that detailed knowledge of the community which enabled him to get a great deal more news out of the column than was actually printed. He noticed that Elsie Farnham had gone to the city for a visit, and the sheriff's brow puckered. That meant she and John had split up. Elsie's visit would be duly announced as a separation after a few weeks—

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The telephone rang.

Mechanically Eldon reached for it, picked it up and said, "Hello," before it dawned on him that in all probability this was his sister-in-law calling to tell him that it was high time for him to come home; that if the County expected him to work overtime, the County should pay him for it; that he was too easygoing anyway and people were always taking advantage of him; that—

"Hello, Sheriff!" The man's voice was excited. "This is Sam Beckett. There's a dead woman down at my place!"

"Who is she?"

"Don't know."

"How long she been dead?"

"I don't know."

"How did she die?"

"I think somebody stuck a knife into her I just found her."

The sheriff said, "Don't touch anything. I'm coming right out."

He left the office on the run, climbed in the County car and drove rapidly down Chestnut Street, which paralleled Main Street. He didn't use the sirens. To cronies he sometimes explained that using sirens in a small city was mostly "showing off." He said that you could make just as good time by taking the side streets and driving steadily and carefully as you could by hitting the main street and scaring everyone to death.

But the sheriff did switch on the official red spotlight, and once outside of the city he sent the car lurching forward in a swift rush of gliding speed.

It was ten miles to Sam Beckett's place, and the sheriff made it in ten minutes flat from the time he had started the motor on the County car.

Sam Beckett, looking shaken and bewildered, was waiting for him. Mrs. Beckett was standing beside him, making the fitful, useless motions of a frail, nervous woman under the influence of great excitement.

"You all alone, Sheriff?" she asked, apprehensively, almost incredulously.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Land sakes, you two hadn't oughta go traipsing around there all alone! You can't tell *what*'s over there."

"What did you see, Sam?" Eldon asked.

"This girl lying face down, right in the fresh plowed ground. She's sort of blonde-like. Ain't much more than twenty, I'd say. Nice clothes and—this hole in her back. Looks like she'd been stabbed."

"You make any tracks around the place?"

"Just where I walked up to her."

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"Okay, let's go see."

Beckett said nervously, "I was plowing and she was lying there right on the plowed ground, and no one had left *any* tracks. If somebody killed her, he must have—"

The sheriff climbed on the tractor and stood with his feet braced on the drawbar. "Let's go over in this," he said.

"Now you be careful!" Mrs. Beckett fired a shrill warning after them.

"We'll be careful, ma'am."

The sheriff felt his belt.

"Got your gun?" Mrs. Beckett asked.

Eldon laughed. "Wasn't looking for my gun. I was looking to see if my flashlight was hanging on my belt. It's okay."

The sheriff opened the gate when they crossed over to the old Higbee place. "Keep right in your same tracks, Sam," he said, "just as well as you can."

Beckett nodded and drove back across the plowed ground, keeping in the same tracks he had made before. By following those tracks it was easy to return to the place where the headlights illuminated the huddled, inanimate object lying on the plowed field.

"Those footprints," the sheriff said, "are they yours?"

"They're mine."

"There aren't any other footprints at all, Sam?"

"That's what I noticed," Beckett said uneasily. "I was telling you there wasn't any tracks."

"She just didn't float down here, Sam."

"The way I figure it," Sam said, "is that she must have been stabbed and then probably started running. She ran across the field, and the first furrow she came to, she pitched forward and fell on her face, and didn't have strength enough to get up. She died right there. Then I came along with the plow and didn't see her the first time around. After that it was easy to miss her."

"How come you missed her the first time?"

"That was before the moon came up, and I was watching right where the front wheels were going. I kept looking down."

The sheriff climbed down from the tractor, being careful to step in the same tracks Beckett had made. He bent over the body. His flashlight sent its beam up and down the still figure. His fingers felt for a pulse, but he was careful not to move the body. Then he stepped back to the tractor and said, "Back up, Sam. Keep in your same tracks. When you get to hard ground, stop."

On hard ground the sheriff

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once more left the tractor and with his flashlight close to the ground he moved slowly along, giving each blade of grass a hawklike scrutiny.

"No blood," he said.

"I *could* have plowed up the blood."

"You *could* have. But if this girl had been running after she'd been stabbed, the blood would have dropped down on her skirt. It's only on her coat."

"By gosh, that's so!" Beckett exclaimed. "I never thought of that."

The sheriff went on, "Tell you what you do, Sam. Go back and telephone Deputy Quinlan. Tell him to get a photographer and to get in touch with the coroner. Looks to me as though we're up against something mighty puzzling here. Me, I'll stay here and kinda watch that things aren't disturbed. Tell Quinlan I've got the County car. He'll have to come out in his car."

"Okay," Beckett said, the relief in his voice indicating that he was only too glad to get away.

"Okay. After you phone George, better come back with your tractor. I want to have the photographer stand up on the tractor and take a shot looking down at the body just to show the way it's lying, and that there aren't any tracks."

"Except mine," Beckett said.

"Except yours," the sheriff remarked tonelessly.

Beryl Quinlan, the nineteen-year-old daughter of the deputy, had been sitting within reaching distance of the telephone for more than an hour. Roy Jasper was scheduled to call from Fort Bixling. And it spoke volumes for Beryl's feeling toward Roy that she would wait for an hour in any one place simply to talk with him over the telephone.

In the living room Beryl's father was having a mysterious low-voiced conference with three of the town's leading citizens. They had no idea that Beryl was waiting for her call. Seated in the big chair by the telephone, she was too completely engrossed to concern herself with the import of the occasional snatches of conversation which drifted out through the curtained doorway of the living room. But she did recognize the voice of the real-estate agent, John Farnham, generally known as a "crusader," and, later, the voices of Edward Lyons and Bertram Glasco.

"I couldn't do it," Quinlan said in a low voice which lacked finality. "Bill Eldon is my superior officer."

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"Bill Eldon's crowding seventy," Glasco said from the smug complacency of his fifty-two years of well-fed prosperity. He was a political bigwig, caring only for power, and was reputed to be able to make or break any man in the County politically.

"Well, now," Lyons interposed quickly, conscious of his own sixty-two years, "it isn't his age that's the matter with him. It's the general way he does things. He's old-fashioned. He's too unchangeable—too dated. That's it, he's dated."

Lyons beamed at the astuteness of his own diagnosis. Publisher of the *Rockville Gazette*, he was also a political opportunist whose entire influence had been built up by a shrewd ability to forecast the trends in local political opinion. He had a habit of being on the winning side. And after identifying himself with the winner, he managed to impress on the uninitiated, and some few of the cognoscenti as well, the vote-getting importance of the *Gazette*.

"Your duty," Glasco suavely pointed out to Quinlan, "is to the County and its people. You're drawing pay from them. Personally I don't think Bill should run again, and I don't think he would if he were faced with a hot fight."

"It might not be a hot fight," Quinlan said.

Lyons cleared his throat. "The *Gazette* would make it hot."

"See here, George," Glasco hastily interposed, "if, in the next important case that breaks, you'd just ride along and not make any suggestions, Bill Eldon would dig a hole for himself and fall in it—flat on his face."

"Is it your idea that I should lay down on the job?"

"No, no. Not at all," Glasco protested hastily. "Just follow his instructions. Do whatever Sheriff Eldon tells you to, but don't go out of your way to make suggestions."

"I don't think I'd like to do that," Quinlan muttered.

"The point is," Glasco hurriedly went on, "suppose old Bill *does* make a botch of some big case. Then he wouldn't run again. Then the question is—would you run?"

"Oh, sure—if Bill wasn't running."

"But suppose he became obstinate and did run. Would you be willing to resign a few months before election, and then give the voters a chance to say whether it hadn't been because you were so efficient as a deputy that they'd been keeping Bill in the sheriff's office?"

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"I wouldn't want to run against Bill."

"It isn't what you'd want to do. It's what—"

At that moment the telephone rang, and Quinlan, pushing back his chair, showed he welcomed the interruption. Beryl Quinlan promptly lifted the receiver and said, "Hello," in the dulcet voice she reserved for boy friends and important company. The sound of her voice so close at hand froze the little group in the living room into surprised immobility.

The operator said, "I have a long-distance call for Miss Beryl Quinlan. Is she there?"

"Speaking," Beryl said.

"Just a moment."

Roy Jasper's voice was eager. "Hello, hello!"

"Roy!" Beryl exclaimed.

"Oh, darling, I thought—"

The crisp voice interrupted, "Drop twenty-five cents for three minutes, please."

Then Beryl's end of the line went dead, and she had to wait agonized seconds until once more she heard Roy's voice. "Say, Beryl! Have I got news for you! I'm going to be able to make it! Yes, sir, your GI's coming home!"

"Oh, Roy!"

"Going to be glad to see me?"

"*Am* I!"

"How's everything?"

"Oh, fine—especially now."

"You were right there at the telephone, weren't you?"

"Well—yes."

"Honey, I think I'm breaking down their resistance. I *may* get a discharge."

"Oh, Roy, you wouldn't try to kid me, would you?"

"No fooling."

"When?"

"I can't tell when. Pretty soon, perhaps. But I'm getting off for a two-week furlough. I'll see you tomorrow. You'll save a date for me?"

"*One?*"

"Dancing?"

"That will be lovely!"

"Know something?"

"What?"

"I'm crazy to see you."

Beryl's youthfully clear voice, held low in an effort to insure privacy, was, nevertheless, distinctly audible to the anxious group in the living room. She said, "It'll be nice—seeing *you.*"

Glasco growled irritably, "She wasn't out there all the time, was she?"

"I don't think so," George Quinlan said apologetically. He went to the door of the living room and stared moodily out at the telephone. Then in an aggrieved gesture to emphasize his desire for privacy, he pulled the heavy curtains closer together. Beryl's voice con-

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tinued to penetrate through the curtains.

The four men sat uncomfortably silent while the cryptic conversation went on, until the operator's businesslike tone advised the talkers that the three minutes were up.

Roy promptly said, "'Bye, honey," and hung up. Beryl clung to the receiver for a moment or two after the connection was severed, as though loath to relinquish the channel over which Roy's voice had come. Then she hung up.

Almost instantly the phone started ringing again.

Beryl eagerly snatched up the receiver. "Hello, hello!" she said. "Hello, Roy!"

A man's heavy voice, sharp with excitement, said, "I want George Quinlan right away. It's a murder!"

"Just a minute," Beryl said. "Father, here's a call. The man says it's a murder."

Quinlan jerked back the heavy curtains and strode to the telephone. He picked up the receiver, listened to Sam Beckett's hurried voice. The deputy asked a couple of routine questions and then said, "I'll be right out."

He hung up and walked back to the living room. His face was without expression but his eyes couldn't keep from showing his relief. "Woman murdered out on the old Higbee place," he said. "I've got to go. Bill Eldon's out there. It's an impossible case on the face of it. Sam Beckett found her lying face down on a freshly plowed field with no tracks. They want me to go out right away. I've got to get a photographer and notify the coroner."

Lyons' eyes sparkled. "I'll be right along," he said.

"Don't let on you got the tip from me," Quinlan warned. "Bill might not like it."

"Bill never gives *us* a break," Lyons observed.

Bertram Glasco rubbed his hands. "This may be *it*, George. A body lying face down on a freshly plowed field with no tracks. That sounds as though it might be something way beyond Bill Eldon's range."

Lyons said, "Let him show the voters what an old fogy he is. It'll serve him right."

Quinlan interposed, "If you boys will excuse me I'll have to rush for it."

Farnham said, "I have every confidence in the ability of Sheriff Eldon to solve crimes. My objection is that he tolerates gambling. I wish you a good night, gentlemen. No, no, George, you have work to do. Don't bother to show me out."

He slipped out through the curtained doorway.

Quinlan said angrily, "It'd

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take an army to stop *all* the gambling in this county. And suppose you broke up the little poker games that run in the lodge rooms around the country—"

"Forget it, George," Glasco said. "He's just the front for our campaign."

"You can't ever satisfy him," Quinlan grumbled.

"We know it," Glasco soothed.

"I've got to go, boys," Quinlan said. "Sorry, but you know how it is."

Quinlan shot out the door. Lyons turned to Glasco. "Can't depend on George," he said. "I told you so."

"He'll come around all right," Glasco said. "It might be a good thing to play this murder up big, Ed. And you might be able to work in a little stuff about how old Bill doesn't have any knowledge of fingerprint classification. You can mention that he depends on George for all the modern stuff. Let it creep in between the lines that Bill's getting to be an old fogy. Then if he slips up on—"

Lyons interrupted testily, "Hell's bells, I'm two paragraphs ahead of you. When it comes to politics don't ever forget that the *Gazette* has been in business a long time. Candidates the *Gazette* supports get elected. Well, I'm going to rush out there and cover this story right from the start."

Glasco watched him out of the door, then said in a low voice, "You mean you support the men who are going to get elected, you damned old buzzard."

He heard the sound of a quick intake of breath, whirled, and saw Beryl Quinlan sitting motionless by the telephone, lips slightly parted, watching him with wide startled eyes.

Glasco hesitated for a moment, then walked past her, saying nothing, because there was nothing to say.

The little group examined the huddled figure in the light of a floodlight that Sam Beckett had rigged on the tractor. They all agreed there were no footprints. The photographer took flashlight photographs from half a dozen different positions, placing his tripod on the light trailer which Sam Beckett had put on the back of the tractor in place of the plow which had been there.

"Well, Jim," the sheriff said to James Logan, the coroner, "guess you can move her now. Poor kid, she can't be over nineteen or twenty."

"Stab wound in the back," Logan said, crisply businesslike, "and the knife isn't there. You

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got a murder case on your hands, Bill."

"Uh huh."

The coroner was plainly puzzled, slightly impatient. "You can't murder a girl in a freshly plowed field with soil as soft as this and not leave *some* sort of tracks."

"Uh huh," the sheriff announced, and then, raising his voice, said, "I want everybody here to remember that when they go out, they're to go out on Sam Beckett's tractor. I don't want any footprints in this plowed ground, no footprints at all. You understand?"

No one said anything.

The sheriff turned to Quinlan and drew him to one side. "What do you make of it, George?" he asked.

"Well, it looks to me—" Quinlan cleared his throat.

"Yeh, go ahead," the sheriff invited.

"Well, it's a murder all right," Quinlan said somewhat lamely. "I'm just wondering—"

"About what?"

"About Sam Beckett."

"What about him?"

"That body couldn't have got there the way he said."

The sheriff fished a sack of tobacco from his vest pocket, skillfully curled a piece of rice paper around his left forefinger, shook grains of tobacco into the paper, and caught the drawstring of the tobacco sack in his teeth to pull it shut. "Go ahead, George."

"Well, Beckett must inadvertently have stepped right in the murderer's tracks. That's the only thing that *could* have happened. And then you came along and walked in Beckett's tracks and—well, that's the only way it *could* have been. And *that* blots out the murderer's tracks."

The sheriff tilted back his sweat-stained sombrero to scratch the grizzled hair around the back of his head. "Well," he said, "maybe we can look around a bit, come daylight."

Quinlan moved away. The sheriff caught Sam Beckett and drew him to one side. "Sam, take everybody out of here on your tractor. Don't let anybody walk out." And then he added in a lower voice, "Come back in about an hour and pick *me* up. Don't tell anybody I'm staying. Make a couple of trips. Take the body out in the first trip."

Beckett nodded and Bill Eldon moved away in the darkness, the tip of his cigarette glowing now and again, then dropping to the earth and being extinguished.

Sam Beckett's tractor moved slowly across the plowed ground to the gate, following the ruts which had now been worn in the soft soil.

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The sheriff sat squatting on his heels, cowboy fashion, watching the activity at the gate as parked automobiles roared into noise, headlights splashed on, and tail-lights glowed in sinister blood-red, meteorlike trails.

Slowly the calm of silence descended, broken here and there by little night noises. The field became dark and silent as it had lain for many months while the heirs of old Marvin Higbee squabbled among themselves.

Somewhere behind the sheriff a horse snorted.

Bill Eldon straightened. He turned toward the vague patch of blackness which marked the trees around the old Higbee homestead and walked slowly, the green springy grass muffling his steps. His legs moved with that peculiar high-kneed motion which characterizes the best hunters when they are stalking game. He carefully refrained from using his flashlight.

A few minutes later when the big gloomy house loomed just ahead of the sheriff, the officer loosened his gun in a holster worn shiny with age. He catfooted along the shadow of the trees, found an advantageous place, and once more squatted on his heels, waiting.

An owl boomed suddenly, puncturing the silence with its weird cry. A faint rustling sounded in the dead leaves on the ground over to his right. The sheriff cocked his head slightly to one side, the better to listen to that rustling. Then as the sound became the unmistakable scurrying of some small animal, he turned back toward the house. For some twenty minutes he sat motionless, until the noises made by small nocturnal animals reassured him. Then he straightened to his feet and went forward.

The doors of the big house were closed. The windows had been boarded up. A *No Trespassing* sign had been nailed to the front of the house.

The sheriff cautiously switched on his flashlight as he inspected the front door and then moved around to the back door. Both doors were closed and locked.

A side door on the east caught the sheriff's eye. There were spider webs on the side of that door which had been freshly broken.

The sheriff turned the knob. The door creaked open, rusty hinges squawking at his intrusion.

Stale, musty air assailed Bill Eldon's nostrils. His flashlight illuminated a small hallway thick with dust and hung with spider webs.

The sheriff pushed across the

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hallway and entered what had at one time been the living room. A rat, caught in the beam of his flashlight, gave a frightened squeak and scurried for shelter.

Old Marvin Higbee had died over a year ago. Since then the heirs had been engaged in such bitter quarreling that none of them had ever lived in the house or tried to keep it up. Now the living room presented a weird sight. Rats were nesting in the upholstery of the davenport, while spiders were entrenched in webs spun from chandeliers. The floors were thick with dust, and the pictures on the walls hung at crazy angles.

During his lifetime Higbee had been chairman of the board of one of the local banks and had amassed a comfortable fortune as a highly successful contractor. The Higbee place had been the scene of much hospitality. A widower, Marvin Higbee had no children. But he left a sister, Carlotta, and two brothers, Oscar and Robert, when he died after a brief illness. His will bequeathed $10,000 to Oscar, $10,000 to Robert, and the balance of the estate to his sister, Carlotta Higbee Lane. When the will was offered for probate, however, Mrs. Kidder, who had been Higbee's housekeeper, calmly advanced the claim that she was, in reality, Mrs. Marvin Higbee. There had been a common-law marriage, she said. Because she had not been provided for in the will, she maintained that she was entitled to the rights of a wife.

There had followed a period during which dirty linen had been aired in public. The two brothers, Oscar and Robert, contended not only that Mrs. Kidder was an adventuress and a liar, but also that Carlotta had exerted undue influence on Marvin at the time he made his will. The result had been a legal Donnybrook Fair in which the big country home had become a forgotten side issue.

The sheriff stooped to hold his flashlight near the floor. As he did so, the oblique illumination disclosed prints which had theretofore been invisible.

The officer studied the dust-covered carpet carefully. He could make out the prints of a woman's shoes and those of at least one man. They had walked back and forth, intersecting each other's paths. They had made a veritable crazy quilt of tracks, seemingly as purposeless as the tracks left by kangaroo rats dancing wildly about in the moonlight.

The old mansion could tell many a tale, the sheriff meditated. Higbee had been a

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deep one—with women, in politics, and in business. For a while Farnham, the crusader, had been after Higbee's scalp, claiming collusion on the big school-construction job. Glasco had been trying to get the *Gazette* to demand an inquiry, but suddenly the whole thing had been dropped. Higbee's charm, fascinating to women, had seemed to be as effective with his political enemies. And Higbee, big, vital, breezy, had gone on his way until death had intervened. No amount of backslapping, the sheriff reflected, could make death change its mind.

Moving cautiously, the sheriff entered other rooms of the house. Everywhere, when he dropped his flashlight to a lower angle, he found the same pattern of zigzagging, intersecting footprints in the dust.

Dust had been carefully cleaned from a table in the kitchen. On that table the sheriff found waxed paper, bread crumbs, a lipstick, and a hammered silver cigarette case. At one end of the table there was a charred streak some two inches long and bordered with gray ash, which had apparently been made by a burning cigarette.

The sheriff examined the linoleum floor. One burnt match was lying underneath the table, and also on the floor were two cigarette stubs, both of which had been pinched out. One held the telltale red of lipstick.

Eldon picked up the cigarette case and turned it over. He saw that a heart had been engraved on the side, an arrow intersecting the heart. There were two initials on the arrow, R at the feathered end and B over the point of the arrow.

After studying the cigarette case thoughtfully, the sheriff placed it back on the table just as he had found it. Then he turned around and to the accompaniment of squeaking boards and scurrying rodents he left the house as he had entered it. He took care to close the creaking side door behind him.

It was nearly eleven when the Quinlan telephone rang stridently, insistently.

Beryl threw a robe around her shoulders and ran from her bedroom. "I'll get it, Mother," she called as she passed her mother's door.

"Thank you, dear."

Beryl fairly flew down the stairs. She raised the receiver and said breathlessly, "Yes, yes, hello. This is Beryl Quinlan."

The drawling voice of the sheriff came over the wire. "Your father there, Beryl?"

"Why, no. Isn't he with you?

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He hasn't come back yet."

"Hasn't got back yet?" the sheriff asked.

"Why, no, he went out to investigate that murder."

"I see."

"Can I take a message?"

The sheriff said, "If you will, please. When he comes in tell him I want to get in touch with him right away. Someone left a silver cigarette case out here at the Higbee place and I want him to look it over for fingerprints."

"I'll tell him, sheriff."

"Tell him to bring that fingerprint outfit of his and to be sure to bring his camera. It's a silver cigarette case with a heart engraved on it and an arrow through the heart. There's an R on one end of the arrow and a B on the other. You tell him, will you, Beryl?"

"I'll tell him — Goodbye." The words came haltingly. And the hand that slowly lowered the receiver back into place seemed to have turned to ice.

The cigarette case she had given to Roy for Christmas!

And then another thought, which for some time had been uneasily asking for attention, suddenly popped out to the front of her consciousness. The long-distance operator had told Roy to deposit *twenty-five* cents. If he had been at Fort Bixling the rate would have been eighty-five cents.

"Beryl," her mother called from the head of the stairs, "what is it? Nothing's happened to your father, has it? Your voice sounded—"

Beryl's laugh was harsh. "Good Heavens, no, Mumsie! Go back to bed. I've—I've got to go find Father."

"Find Father? Why, Beryl, what's the matter? What's happened? Tell me. Don't try to keep it from me."

"Don't be a goose, Mumsie. It was the sheriff. He wanted Dad, that's all, wants him to take some fingerprints right away."

"But your father's *with* the sheriff."

"No, he left."

"Well, the only thing you can do then is wait for him to come in and—"

"Oh, I think I can find him," Beryl said casually, dashing upstairs. "He'll probably be at the *Gazette* office."

"Then why don't you telephone?"

Beryl's cold fingers were frantically divesting herself of her pajamas, picking up lingerie. "He might not be there, Mumsie. He might be some other place where I could just run onto him. I'll drive up and down the main drag, and see if the car's parked somewhere. Remember, he took his own

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car. I can spot it as far as I can see it."

"I wish you'd telephone, dear."

"No, I'll jump in my little whoopee and have Dad located in no time. You be a good girl, Mumsie, and don't worry. And if Dad should come home, tell him I have a message for him."

"Can't you tell me what the message is, and I—"

"I'll tell him," Beryl said. "Tell him to wait for me," and she went streaking down the stairs.

It was nearly midnight when the sheriff drifted in to the coroner's office.

"George here?" he asked.

"Yeah, he's in back with the doctor."

"What did the doctor find?"

"Stab wound in the back—left side. Think it went straight in."

The sheriff said, "I've been trying to get hold of him. I—here he comes now."

George Quinlan stepped out of the back room. "There isn't a drop of blood on the skirt, Bill," he said. "It was a stab wound. Missed the heart, but severed one of the big blood vessels. Death was almost instantaneous. She might have lived for a matter of seconds. It's hard to tell."

The sheriff nodded. Then he beckoned the deputy to one side. "Been lookin' for you, George. Did you see your daughter?"

"She got me on the phone a few seconds ago, said she'd been driving around looking for me. Said you had some fingerprints. I was just starting for the office to pick up the fingerprint outfit."

"I told her to try and get in touch with you," the sheriff said. "There's been a couple of people in the old Higbee house, walking back and forth across the floors, sort of zigzagging, and out in the kitchen I found where some sandwiches had been eaten, and there's a girl's lipstick and a cigarette case. I thought there might be some prints and—"

"You didn't touch those things?" Quinlan asked.

"Well, just sort of picked them up and looked them over," the sheriff admitted.

"Let's hope you didn't smudge any fingerprints. Gosh, Bill, I've told you a dozen times that you've got to be careful handling things that—"

"I know, I know," the sheriff said, "but I thought it was pretty important to see the other side of that case. Had to turn it over to do that."

"How about the lipstick?"

"I didn't touch that."

Quinlan said, "Let's go. I'll

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stop by the office and get my fingerprint outfit."

"You got your car here?"

"Uh huh."

"I'll meet you out there," the sheriff said.

"You want to take a look at the body?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not right now. Get prints of her fingers?"

"Yes."

"What do you make of her?"

"Natural blonde, blue eyes, smooth skin, a beautiful girl, somewhere between nineteen and twenty."

"Too bad," the sheriff said, and then added after a moment, "I'll be seeing you out there."

There was little traffic on Main Street at this hour, so the sheriff swung out close to the center of the street. He opened up the County car, but didn't use the siren. This time it took him nearly fifteen minutes to get to the Higbee gate.

The sheriff got out of the car and opened the gate. Then he paused as his headlights disclosed tire tracks superimposed on the tracks left by the tractor.

Quinlan drove up to find the sheriff down on hands and knees studying these tracks with the aid of his spotlight.

"What's the idea?" the deputy asked, jumping out. "You found something?"

"A car's been in here," the sheriff said.

"You mean since the tractor came out?"

"Yes."

"It didn't get stuck?"

"No. The tractor had packed down the earth hard enough so a car could drive in all right."

"Well, now, that's something," Quinlan said. "Wonder who it could have been. Probably some of the newspaper people snooping around. It wouldn't have done any harm to have put a lock on that gate."

"Or left somebody here," the sheriff said.

Quinlan's silence showed that he felt very definitely someone should have been left in charge but that it had been a matter for the sheriff to arrange.

"Tell anything by the tracks?" Quinlan asked.

"Not much. Tires worn pretty smooth and only occasionally you can get a bit of the pattern. And if you'll look over here on the left you can see where the front wheels swung just a little bit out of the ruts. Now, that must have been when the car was going out, because they're the last tracks that were made. So this'll be the right front wheel on the car. And you notice that little nick out of the tire, on the side? Better

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remember that, George. We may run onto a car like that again if we keep our eyes open."

Quinlan said, "Hadn't I better get the photographer and have a picture taken of these tracks?"

"Can't you do it?"

"No. I've got a fingerprint camera and that's all. Anyway, that's a little beyond my technique."

"Well, just make some measurements of that gouged-out place in the tire and sort of sketch the pattern you can see," the sheriff said, "and we'll get going. I want to do some more work in that house."

Quinlan said, "If that should turn out to be important evidence—"

"Well," the sheriff said, "I guess you and I can remember those tracks well enough to identify the automobile, can't we?"

"Yes, but—"

"Go on."

"Nothing."

"All right," Bill Eldon said at length. "Tell you what you do, George. Take a page from your notebook and just tear off a bit here and there until we get it so it just fits that place out of the right front tire."

Quinlan nodded. He took a page from his notebook and bent over the tracks in the moist earth, carefully tearing off little bits of paper until he had the size and shape to suit him. "It's an exact fit, Bill."

"All right," the sheriff said. "You keep it. Now let's drive on to the house. I want you to take a look at that cigarette case."

"We'll obliterate these tracks," Quinlan objected.

"But we'll know the car if we ever run across it on account of that tire," the sheriff drawled. "Come on, George."

Quinlan started to say something, then checked himself.

They drove through the plowed strip of ground to the level field where the car jolted along over the weed-encrusted road, through the big shade trees, to the Higbee house.

The sheriff led the way to the creaking side door which he opened.

The scurrying of rats and mice for shelter was distinctly audible, a pattering of tiny feet beating a tattoo of panic on the floor.

The sheriff paused long enough to lower the angle of the flashlight. "At least one woman, and at least one man," he pointed out. "Sort of zigzagging around."

Quinlan's half-articulate comment was little more than a grunt.

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Bill Eldon shifted the beam of his flashlight. "This way to the kitchen, George."

They entered the kitchen. The beam of the flashlight showed the table with its waxed paper, the lipstick, the cigarette stubs, and the charred groove in the table. The beam of the flashlight illuminated the silver cigarette case, glanced from it in a splash of reflected light on the cobwebbed ceiling.

Quinlan opened the fingerprint outfit he was carrying, carefully gripped the corners of the cigarette case with rubber-tipped tongs, and dusted powder over the silver.

"Hump! That's funny."

"What's the matter?"

"There isn't a print on it."

"Maybe the person who handled it was wearing gloves," the sheriff said. "How about the lipstick?"

Quinlan managed to get two prints from the lipstick that were legible enough to give results.

The sheriff seemed unimpressed to the point of disinterest. His flashlight was exploring the floor. "*One* burnt match," he said. "That's significant."

"I don't get it."

"If you were lighting three cigarettes how many matches would you use?"

Quinlan grinned. "If a good-looking girl was sitting across the table from me I'd use one—wait a minute, I'd use two."

"That's right. But there's only one."

"Then something must have happened to one of the burnt matches. Perhaps a pack rat carried it away."

"Nope," the sheriff drawled. "It ain't that. The way I figure it, the man was a chain smoker. He and the girl sat down here at the table. They had some sandwiches, then they settled down for a smoke. He lit her cigarette and lit his own—one match. After they'd smoked their cigarettes he lit his second one from the stub of the first. The girl only smoked one cigarette. When she'd finished it she took out her lipstick and started to fix up her mouth—and it was then something happened, right at that particular moment."

"How do you fix it as being at that time?"

"Because they jumped up and were startled. The man put his cigarette down on the table and never had a chance to get back to pick it up. It lay there and burned that groove. The woman dropped her lipstick."

"And then?" Quinlan asked.

"And some time after that," the sheriff said, "the girl was found stabbed in a plowed field

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with no tracks going in either direction, not even her own."

"How long after that?" Quinlan asked.

"That, son," the sheriff said, "is something we've got to find out. By puttin' two and two together, you get an answer, and it don't seem to be the right one."

It began to rain about three in the morning, a fine, misty cold rain. By daylight the tangled grass and weeds of the field were glistening with moisture, and the dark lumps on the ridges of the plowed ground reflected the sullen daylight which filtered through the low bank of clouds.

The bent figures of the sheriff and George Quinlan moved slowly along over the boundary between the grassy field and the freshly plowed earth. With the thoroughgoing patience of veteran trackers they inched their way along, covering every foot of ground.

Daylight was well advanced and the drizzle had stopped when they returned to their point of beginning.

"Well," Quinlan said, "that settles it. No one left this piece of ground after the murder was committed, so the body must have come in from the outside—unless it was dropped from an airplane."

The sheriff straightened. He rolled and lit a cigarette. "I noticed one thing back there in the house, George. You remember where those drapes hang over the door? There's a long braided silk doodad with tassels on it—but there's only one. Shouldn't there be two?"

Quinlan laughed. "Shucks, Bill, the way this place has been left it's lucky there's even one. But there should be two. I've got the same sort of drapes at home."

The sheriff thought for a while. "What do you s'pose frightened those people after they'd just eaten?"

"I'm darned if I know," Quinlan said. "I'm an officer, not a mind reader. It must have been shortly before the murder, and that must have been after dark. Seems strange they'd have been eating sandwiches then. They must have planned to stay all night searching. And speaking of eating, I'm going home, change my wet clothes, and have some breakfast."

"Well, now," the sheriff drawled, "guess *I'll* drop in at a restaurant and—"

"A restaurant!"

"Uh huh. My sister-in-law's stayin' up at my house."

Quinlan laughed. "Come on up with me—no, hang it, if you don't change your wet clothes you'll catch cold. Get up to

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your house and get into some dry clothes."

The sheriff looked down at his wet trousers, sighed wearily. "Well, I s'pose I've got to."

It was a few minutes before nine when Beryl Quinlan saw Roy Jasper turn the corner and come walking toward the house.

Beryl ran to the door, whipped it open, and dashed down the stairs. Roy saw her coming and flung up his arm in a gesture of greeting. They met at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Roy!"

"Hi, Beryl!"

She gave him her lips in a swift eager kiss, then pulled away.

"Hey," he said, "what's the idea of such a nervous little peck?"

"We may have an audience. Come on, I want to talk with you. When did you leave the fort?"

"Last night—late."

"Been up all night?"

"Just about. Couldn't get a bus until after midnight. Travel sure is heavy these days."

"Where were you when you telephoned me, at the fort?"

"Just outside of the fort, a row of telephone booths there. Why?"

"Oh, just wondering. Let's not go in for a minute. Dad's been out pretty much all night on a case and came home soaking wet, took a hot bath, changed his clothes, and has to go to the office in a minute. The family will engulf you if you go inside. Let's sit out on the porch."

"Suits me," Roy said. "This isn't front-porch weather, though. Been raining here?"

"Just a drizzle. It quit about an hour and a half ago. Let's sit here. How about a cigarette?"

"How about a kiss, baby? We don't have an audience here."

She gave him her lips.

"That's better. What's the matter, honey?"

"Just getting a good look at you. How about the discharge?"

"Don't know yet. Think I may get it."

"And how about my cigarette?"

Roy casually produced a silver cigarette case, snapped the catch with his thumb, opened it, and extended it to Beryl.

"Roy!" she exclaimed.

He glanced up quizzically at the sound of her voice.

"That's the case I gave you for Christmas."

"Sure. What's funny about that?"

"I—I thought perhaps you'd lost it."

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His forehead puckered into a puzzled frown. "Now what gave you *that* idea? And do you really want a cigarette?"

"Of course," she said, taking a cigarette.

He took one and lit her cigarette, then his own. He dropped the case back into his pocket, regarding her thoughtfully. "What's the big idea?" he asked.

"I—oh, nothing. Roy, how much did you pay for that telephone call last night?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "I really got even with the telephone company that time," he said. "I let one of the other boys come in and place a call to a nearby town while I was waiting. The rate there is only twenty-five cents. I guess the operator got the calls mixed. Anyway, she told me mine was twenty-five cents and that's all I paid, twenty-five cents."

"What happened to the other boy?"

"Don't worry about him," Roy said. "He wouldn't have paid any more than twenty-five cents on *his* call, and they couldn't make him. I got to feeling a little cheap about it afterwards. I hope they don't take it out of the telephone girl's salary, but, honey, you know how it is. I've been stuck so many times when I'd stay in a hotel and put in a call—"

"That wasn't the fault of the telephone company. That was the fault of the girl at the hotel switchboard. She didn't clear the line right away and naturally the telephone company had to charge you for all that extra time."

"Well," he admitted, "I felt cheap about it afterwards, but there was nothing I could do. You see, honey, you were on the line and I didn't want to take time then telling her she'd made a mistake in my favor and having her wait and look up the call. I—"

The door opened. George Quinlan took two or three steps before he caught sight of the couple from the corner of his eye. He whirled almost apprehensively, then laughed nervously and said, "I didn't know you two were out here. Hello, Roy. When did you get in?"

"Just now."

Quinlan came across and shook hands. "Been up all night," he said, "and I'm a little jumpy. Had breakfast?"

"Yes, thanks, had it more than an hour ago."

"There's some coffee on the table. Mrs. Quinlan will be glad to see you."

"We'll be in in a minute," Beryl said, and then smiling at her father said, "Tell Mother, will you?"

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That gave the deputy his cue. He said, "I will. See you later, Roy," and went back into the house.

"What's the big case?" Roy asked.

"A murder down at the old Higbee place. I understand she's a girl around my age, blonde, stabbed in the back."

"The old Higbee place?" Jasper asked, frowning.

"Yes. A man named Beckett bought the place and had started to plow. He found the body."

"Beckett?" Roy repeated the name after her as though trying to refresh his recollection. "Oh, yes, Sam Beckett. I know him. What in the world was this girl doing in the old Higbee place?"

"No one knows. They don't seem to have any clue as yet to her identity."

Jasper finished his cigarette. Almost mechanically he opened the cigarette case, took out another, and lit the second cigarette from the end of the first. "Guess that's going to keep your father busy," he said. "How about going in and getting some of that coffee, Beryl?"

Sheriff Bill Eldon propped the *Rockville Morning Register* in front of his coffee cup.

The *Register* had gone to press about two o'clock in the morning, and had relied on large headlines and bold-faced type to obscure the fact that the paper had but few facts concerning the murder.

The editorial attitude of the paper was hostile to the entire County administration and Sheriff Eldon expected no quarter from it. On the other hand, it did a pretty good job of news coverage, although it occasionally slipped some editorial barb into its factual reporting.

Bill Eldon read the account carefully and then slowly reread it in order to give himself that semblance of preoccupation which would curb the conversation of his sister-in-law.

Finally Doris could stand it no longer. She said, "Well, if you ask me, somebody's making an awful fool out of you officers."

The sheriff's silence was a courteous suggestion that no one was asking her.

"Or," Doris went on, "perhaps you're making fools of yourselves."

"Could be," the sheriff admitted laconically.

"Will you kindly tell me, Bill Eldon, how in the name of sense any person can walk over moist, freshly plowed, loamy soil and not leave any footprints?"

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"I didn't say it could be done."

"The newspaper says it *has* been done."

"Well, I'm not responsible for what the newspapers say."

"The way they talk about you makes you sound like an old fossil."

"The *Register* is on the opposite side of the political fence."

"Well, the *Gazette* doesn't seem to be putting you up on any pedestal."

"It won't be out until tonight."

"I'm not talking about this case. I'm talking about the way they've been writing you up lately."

"They're friendly."

"Well, you'd better watch out for friends like that."

The sheriff was silent.

"It *does* seem to me," Doris went on exasperatedly, "that if you had more git-up-an'-git you'd command more respect."

The sheriff grinned. "You don't get respect from the opposite political party—not publicly and in print, anyway. If you move along slow and easy, you're an old fossil. If you have git-up-an'-git you're trying to cover your incompetence behind a smokescreen of hysterical activity."

There was a moment of welcome silence while Doris thought this over. "Well," she demanded at length, "who *is* this girl?"

"We don't know."

"What are you doing to find out?"

"We've got a couple of clues we're working on."

"What clues?"

"Cleaning marks on her jacket and skirt, the name of a store sewed inside the jacket."

"A local store?"

"No, one in San Rodolpho."

The sheriff's wife interposed to say quietly, "Bill, you want me to send that suit out to be cleaned and pressed?"

"Please."

"How soon do you want it back?"

"Soon as I can get it."

"You going to get some sleep today?"

"Afraid I'll have to keep going today. I—"

The telephone rang.

The sheriff went to the phone. He heard a woman's voice say, "Long-distance call from San Rodolpho," and then the voice of Everett Gilmer, the chief of police in San Rodolpho. "Hello, Bill. Think I've got your party located. The Acme Cleaners has a record of cleaning the jacket. The girl's name is Elizabeth Dow. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing. She live there?"

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"Apparently. We have an address in an apartment house. She's moved from there, but we're tracing her. The description fits. Want to come down?"

The sheriff hesitated a moment, then said, "Okay, I'll be down. See what you can find out and have it ready for me by the time I get there. I'll stop by the courthouse and pick up some photographs."

The sheriff hung up the telephone and glanced over at the table. Seeing the alert angle at which the head of his sister-in-law was cocked, he said suddenly, "I've got to rush out. I'll be back this evening."

"Where are you going?" Doris demanded so eagerly that the words all ran together into one continuous rattle of sound.

"Out," the sheriff said.

Everett K. Gilmer, chief of police of San Rodolpho, was a big bluff man whose twinkling eyes radiated cordiality to brother officers, but could assume an ominous hardness when scrutinizing prisoners. He said to Bill Eldon, "Well, Sheriff, I've got a line on her. If you've got some photos we might just check with someone who can make an identification."

"Who you got?"

"Woman who runs the apartment house where she had an apartment for a while. When she moved she left a forwarding address. But I thought we'd better check up first with someone who can make an absolute identification. If she's the one I've got quite a lot on her. And I think she's the one."

"Let's go," the sheriff agreed.

They drove to a frame house that had at one time been an example of three-storied prosperity, but with the spread of the business area it had now been turned into an apartment house.

The heavy-set woman who ran the place promptly identified the photographs which Sheriff Eldon produced.

"That's the girl. That's Elizabeth, all right. What's happened to *her?*"

"She was killed."

"How?"

"Stabbed."

"Good heavens! And such a nice girl, too!"

"Any idea who might have done it? Enemies or anything of that sort?"

"No. While she was here she was just as quiet and well-behaved as anyone could ask."

"Know anything about her friends or relatives?"

"No, I don't. I took over the place just before she moved out and—"

"We got some more recent

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stuff lined up, Bill," Gilmer interposed. "Just wanted to make sure she was the party before I started following the other trails."

"Her mother had died just before she moved out," the apartment manager volunteered, "somewhere in—now, let me see. I think it was somewhere in Colorado. I remember she got a wire saying her mother was very low and she flew out, and then wrote me that her mother had passed away and that she'd stay for the funeral and move to another apartment when she got back, and she sent me two weeks' rent and asked if that would be all right."

"Know where that letter is?"

"I burned it."

"About when was this?"

"Five or six months ago. I can look up the date when she left if you want."

"I already have that," Gilmer said to the sheriff. "It was in August."

"That's right," the woman said. "I think it was August."

Bill Eldon nodded to Gilmer. "Let's go, Everett."

They went to the telegraph office and wired the Denver police to consult statistical records and rush any information concerning a woman by the name of Dow who had died in Colorado within the last few months.

Then Chief Gilmer and Bill Eldon spent a couple of hours plodding along in the dull monotony of routine legwork, tracing Elizabeth Dow from one lodging house to another, finding where she had been employed and locating friends who had known her.

From this scattered pattern of information the sheriff and Gilmer pieced together a mosaic showing a clear picture of a young woman, vivacious, intelligent, alert, a steady, dependable worker, a loyal friend filled with the joy of life, yet respecting herself and commanding the respect of her friends. There had been one or two boy friends, but for the most part she had preferred a group of intimates to the more intimate companionship of boy friends. She had been employed as a cashier in a cafeteria. Her nimble fingers, quick eyes, and winning personality had made for adept efficiency as well as for popularity with customers.

The day before had been her day off, and about ten o'clock she had been seen with a young man who was strange to the girl's set, although he had been seen with her off and on during the past week. The couple had sat for half an hour talking earnestly at a table in the cafeteria. And then Elizabeth Dow had got a cardboard

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container and put up a lunch—roast beef sandwiches, deviled eggs, crisp lettuce, and pie. Then she and the young man, a tall dark chap in Army uniform, had left the cafeteria. That had been around eleven. Neither one had been seen since.

At this point in the investigation a wire came in from the Denver police:

ELVIRA DOW AGED FIFTY-SIX DIED CORONARY THROMBOSIS AUGUST 23RD, BURIED HERE. FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS MADE BY DAUGHTER ELIZABETH WHO REGISTERED HOTEL GIVING ADDRESS YOUR CITY.

"Well," Gilmer said, "that's all there is to it. Find the man who was with her and you've got the murderer. You say there was waxed paper on the table in that old house?"

"That's right."

"Find this chap in uniform. That'll be all there is to it."

The sheriff reached for his battered sombrero and put it on. He started for the door, and then paused to regard the chief of police with thought-puckered eyes. "You know, Everett," he said, "it *may* not be that simple. When you've been in office as long as I have you get so you pay more attention to people and less to clues."

Rush Medford, the district attorney, stepped out from his private office to receive George Quinlan.

"Hello, George. I asked you to come up here because I wanted to talk with you—confidentially."

Quinlan glanced significantly at the unlocked door of the reception office, then at the closed door of Medford's private office. Medford, lowering his voice, went on hastily, "I have a man waiting in there, George. I want you to meet him. I want you to give him every bit of help you can. His name's Walworth—Martin Walworth. Ever hear of him?"

Quinlan shook his head.

"Famous all over the state as a criminologist. He—"

"Oh, yes! I've heard of *him*. I place him now."

The district attorney said confidentially, "I'm calling him in, George, at the suggestion of some very, very influential citizens. They feel that there's a soft spot in the County administration. You know, old Bill prides himself on paying more attention to people's reactions than to material evidence. Some whimsical eccentricity on his part that's going to get us all into trouble

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one of these days. You know how it is when word gets around that the crowd in the courthouse has been in office too long. There's always a tendency to make a clean sweep. And that takes in *all* of us."

"What do you expect Walworth to do?" Quinlan asked.

The district attorney smiled. "I expect him to solve this mystery very quickly and very competently, demonstrating to the voters of this County the fact that the old hit-or-miss methods of investigating a crime are as obsolete as the horse and buggy. The modern criminologist uses scientific equipment and streamlined efficiency."

"You mean you're going to use him to show up the sheriff?"

"I mean I'm going to use him to solve the mystery."

"The sheriff won't like that," Quinlan said.

"Of course he won't like it. But there's a murder to be solved, and the County has *some* rights. I certainly trust that *you* have no objections."

"No," Quinlan said, "I haven't any objections."

"Come on in," Medford invited and opened the door of his private office.

Martin Walworth was a short-bodied, heavy-featured man with bushy eyebrows and huge spectacles. His round black pupils were pinpoints of perpetual scrutiny in the center of pale, steady eyes. He didn't get up or shake hands when the district attorney performed the introduction.

"No weapon was found?" Walworth asked after a few preliminaries.

"No weapon," Quinlan admitted.

"The autopsy seems to have been handled in rather a careless manner," Walworth said. "However, I'm hopeful of getting a fairly good description of the murder weapon by an investigation which I shall make personally. There were no fingerprints whatever on the cigarette case?"

"None whatever."

The criminologist's eyes were stern with accusation. "Do I understand that the sheriff picked it up?"

"He said he picked it up."

"But there were *no* fingerprints?"

"None."

"Not latents that were smudged?"

"No. There were none."

Walworth grunted. "Then someone wiped it," he said, "wiped it clean—*after* the sheriff picked it up."

"Looked as though it might have been wiped with some-

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thing like a chamois skin, polished as smooth and slick as a whistle," Quinlan admitted.

"*After* the sheriff picked it up."

Quinlan nodded. "I guess it has to be that way."

"But you didn't say so," the district attorney accused, "not until after Walworth pointed it out."

"I didn't volunteer any suggestions. The fact speaks for itself," Quinlan said.

Walworth grunted, "And there were *no* tracks in the soft soil?"

"No tracks."

"That, manifestly, is impossible."

"You can see the photographs—"

"Photographs, bah! They are taken with a synchronized flash. That makes the picture flat as a pancake. The lighting should have been scientifically controlled."

Quinlan said nothing.

"Obviously," Walworth went on, "the fact in itself is impossible. Therefore someone is lying. It may be this Beckett."

"It may be," Quinlan admitted.

The district attorney interposed hastily, "Here in the country where a good many people know each other and—well, you have to be a little careful, you know, Mr. Walworth. Political consideration as well as a person's integrity—"

"I understand," Walworth said. "Is there any other evidence?"

Quinlan told him about the car which had driven into the field after the tractor had made its last trip out.

Walworth digested that information with the profound expression of a deep thinker. "This piece that was gouged out of the right front tire," he said, "you say you used a piece of paper to get the outline of that?"

"Yes."

"Where is that paper?"

Almost involuntarily, Quinlan's hand dropped to his pocket. Then he remembered. The triangular piece of paper had been in the pocket of the wet suit he had taken off to have sent to the cleaner. Because the paper had no weight, no bulk, he had overlooked it. To confess his negligence in this was unthinkable. He tried to keep his voice casual.

"I have it at home."

Walworth's comment was short and to the point.

"Get it," he said, and then added disgustedly, "What a slipshod way of identifying a tire!"

Quinlan parked his car in

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front of his house and, because he intended to start back for the courthouse almost at once, left the door open.

He walked across the sidewalk, turned to the right on the smaller walk which skirted the house, and went around to the back porch.

He entered quietly and climbed the stairs to his room. He wondered if his wife had made a careful search of his pockets in preparing the wet suit for the cleaners. If she hadn't, could he get hold of the suit before the bit of paper was ruined?

Quinlan's pulse gave an involuntary reaction to the relief he felt as he looked at the place on the top of his dresser which was reserved for his personal belongings. Every minute since his talk with the criminologist had been a thought-tortured nightmare of apprehension that the piece of paper might have been irrevocably lost. But there it was, lying on the dresser, a mud-soiled triangular slip of paper, silent tribute to the thorough-going loyalty of a steadfast helpmeet.

Quinlan picked up the paper, turned, and walked quietly back down the stairs.

From the living room he heard Beryl's clear voice, remarkable for its low-pitched carrying power, saying into the telephone, "Will you *please* give me the long-distance rate to San Rodolpho—after seven o'clock at night, please . . . Twenty-five cents for three minutes? . . . Thank you, Operator, *very* much."

Quinlan left the house by the back door. He noticed that his daughter's car was parked in front of the garage—a jalopy she had picked up herself a couple of years ago.

She should sell that car, the deputy thought, looking at it without quite seeing it. Then a sudden discovery jarred George Quinlan's mind into a new line of activity. He stood regarding a triangular nick in the right front tire, his eyes locked in a stare of incredulous dismay.

Almost mechanically Quinlan moved the few steps necessary to hold the triangular torn bit of paper over the gouged-out place in the tire.

The mud-stained triangle of paper his wife had carefully saved for him was a perfect pattern, just fitting the hole in the tire.

(continued on page 90)

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a NEW story by

JOHN D. MacDONALD

A commentary on our times? Judge for yourself...

HE WAS ALWAYS A NICE BOY

by JOHN D. MacDONALD

I JUST CANNOT UNDERstand how such a thing could happen. It is a nightmare and I guess we have to live with it. Or try to forget it, or something.

Why, Martha and I have known that boy ever since he was a little bit of a tyke. They moved into that house right across there—of course, you already know which one. The white one with the dark red trim and the dark red front door. What year was it, Martha? Forty-eight? That's right. Jimmy was about three then, two years younger than our youngest. Cute little kid. Sort of shy, but nice. You know what I mean. A likable kid. Nothing fresh about him.

You're a psychologist, you say? Well, I hope you people have some sort of an answer for a thing like this. Nobody in the neighborhood has any answer, I can tell you. This is a nice quiet neighborhood. It being a dead-end street helps out.

Well, they moved in in forty-eight like I said. A nice young couple with a three-year-old kid. Joe Bell was working at the heater company then, and Connie was home with the kid. They seemed like nice enough people, you understand, but they never did get what you'd call real friendly with anybody on the block.

They had plenty of friends all right—people they knew before they moved out here. I'm not saying anything against them, these friends of theirs, but they weren't exactly the sort of people who would have fitted in well in this neighborhood. Martha and me, we're not what you'd call prudes. We like a drink once in a while, and we like to go to parties. But they really had some dandies there

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over at the Bells' house. Until way in the morning, whooping and hollering so you'd wonder how the kid got any sleep, but I suppose he was used to it. Joe would have a hell of a hangover some mornings, but he'd make it to work all right. He's the sort who wants to get ahead.

Back there in forty-eight and forty-nine, that was when women used to come around about every afternoon and they'd play bridge over there. Martha heard they played for some pretty good stakes, too. I remember one time when they first moved in Connie had Jimmy in a sort of harness thing with a loop that went over a wire so he had plenty of leeway to run up and down the side yard. He'd play out there by himself in the afternoons.

It got to raining one day. Not hard. There was the kid out there in the yard and Martha got to fretting about him. I was at work at the time. Anyway, Martha went over and unhooked him out of the harness and took him to the front door. Got sort of snippy about it, didn't she?—Connie, I mean. It made Martha feel a little bit like she'd poked her nose in where it wasn't wanted. But there were no hard feelings about it. They were polite after that and we were too.

Now don't get the idea from that that Jimmy was abused. There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for that kid. They kept him dressed up fine, and they fed him well, and he was a healthy kid. You could see that. We heard sort of indirect-like that Connie couldn't have any more kids and that was why they had just the one.

It was in 1950 that Joe Bell quit at the heater company and went over to Julliard Aircraft. They were on Air Force contracts then, and Joe put in a lot of overtime and really began to haul in the money. Jimmy was five then and going to kindergarten. About six months after Joe went to work there, Connie got a job there too. They put Jimmy in a sort of day-nursery deal that kept him all day while Connie was working.

Her hours were different than Joe's, so she got a car of her own and when she came home she'd pick up Jimmy from the day school. That was the year they enlarged the cellar and put in the big recreation room and that was where they had their parties whenever they had a chance. Working agreed with Connie all right. She was a good-looking woman right from the start and when she began to put some of her earnings on her back she really began to look like something. And they

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got Jimmy a whole mess of expensive toys. When he was six he had a little car with an electric motor in it and he used to tool it up and down the block.

--Jimmy played with our kids a lot. We've always been nuts about picnics in our family, and the kids wanted Jimmy along, so we'd ask and it was always fine with them for Jimmy to come right along with us. It got so automatic that on Sunday he'd come right along and we even stopped bothering to ask. Mostly because they slept so late on Sundays that you would have to wake them up to ask them.

Right from the beginning Jimmy was a self-reliant little kid. He'd get up on Sunday and he'd make his own breakfast over there, being careful not to make too much noise, and then he'd come over. When the weather was too bad for picnics he'd come on over anyway and he played good with our kids. No scraps and fusses. When he hurt himself that kid wouldn't let out a peep.

Well, Joe and Connie stayed right on at Julliard right up through fifty-five. Jimmy went to the Arthur Donovan School --that's the public grade school just five blocks away from here. Let me see. In fifty-five Jimmy was ten, and he must have been in about the fifth grade. You could tell by talking to the kid that he was bright, but he didn't do too well in school. They said he was dreamy. He'd walk on home with our kids and he'd let himself in over there and fix his own lunch and fool around.

I think about then he was making those airplane models. He'd do good work on them, but he'd never completely finish one. Never get it finished to the point where he could take it out and see if it would fly. That may mean something to you. I don't know. Joe and Connie bought him good kits. The kind with regular little gasoline engines that go in them.

Every summer they'd send him to what I guess is just about one of the best camps for kids in the country. He'd go for the full ten weeks. When I got interested in having our kids go to a camp--you know, just for a couple of weeks because we figure it's good for them--I sent for the catalogue from that camp Jimmy went to. It certainly had everything. Swimming, riding, rifle range, archery, water skiing. But the price would curl your hair. We sent ours to the Y camp, and they seemed to like it fine after they got over being homesick.

Jimmy never had very much

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to say about the camp. I guess he liked it all right.

Connie quit working in fifty-five. I guess she was laid off along with a lot of the others. She spent some time at home but I guess she was bored. She went out a lot in the afternoon. After a while it got so she was going out just about every day and not getting back until pretty late.

Then we heard about the trouble. I guess it nearly broke up their marriage. It was some guy she had worked with at Julliard. But somehow Joe and Connie settled their differences and things were all right between them again.

They were never stingy with Jimmy. He always got a big allowance. More than I could afford to give mine. Jimmy didn't throw it around. He'd save it up and buy stuff for himself and then sort of lose interest in what he bought. Then he'd give it away. Usually to my kids. I couldn't see any harm in their accepting.

By the time he was twelve he was a real self-reliant boy. They let him do just about as he pleased. He roamed all over the city on that bike of his. A top-grade English bike with a gear shift and all. He'd go to the movies whenever he felt like it. I tell you it gave me a time with mine because he was younger and he had more freedom than I'd give mine. Jimmy could come back home at any time he pleased, and if he was hungry he always knew where to find food, plenty of it, and he knew how to fix it himself.

Having him so reliant gave Joe and Connie more freedom than we had with ours. When Joe and Connie got a chance to take off for a few days they could go right ahead, and Jimmy was okay to stay home alone and look after himself.

He was always a good kid and a pleasant kid, and nice to be around, but he never did seem to have very much of a sense of fun. You know what I mean? He never acted silly the way kids do. I guess because he was so self-reliant.

There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for that kid. He had the best clothes they could buy him. When he was sixteen—that was in sixty-one—they bought him an almost new convertible for his own. He wasn't careless and reckless with it. He was a good driver for a kid. A good safe driver.

I think it was about then he started seeing less of my kids. He spent a lot more time alone. I don't know where he'd go off to, but sometimes he'd stay away overnight. It didn't seem to worry Joe and Connie too much.

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They sent him off to school when he was eighteen, and three months later he was back home. That was the damnedest thing. I don't know what kind of people they have at that college, but they were certainly way off the mark when they said that Jimmy wasn't emotionally mature enough for college. Jimmy had all his emotions under control. Why, he could talk to you just like you were talking to another grownup. It was a pleasure to talk to that kid.

It seemed to me like a kind of a waste when he got that job at the drive-in. A good-looking, bright kid like that. I suppose it means something to you people that he never had a girl, and never had very much to do with girls. I suppose that's what you call significant. He didn't have anything to do with girls until . . . I can't say it and I even hate to think about it.

You take a kid like that. Hard-working parents who did everything in the world for him. Nothing was too good for Jimmy. It makes you wonder.

I see you keep writing things down. I don't see what good I can do you. He was a good kid from a good neighborhood.

Last night Martha and I stayed up a long time, talking about it. What can you say? Even if you could have asked Jimmy about it before he died, I don't think he could have told you why.

What Martha and I said, we said it seems as if there is kind of . . . of an evil thing loose in the world these days. Something terrible and full of hate. Like maybe it lands here from those UFO's. And then it takes over somebody, some ordinary person like Jimmy Bell.

I don't know what Joe and Connie are going to do. They won't answer the door or the phone. Can't blame them, with those reporters and all hanging around. I talked to some of them at first, yesterday, but then they made me mad the questions they asked, like they wanted me to say the kid was a monster or something, wanting to know if I ever noticed him hurting animals or anything like that when he was little.

Well, that third waitress died this morning, but I guess you can say it's a blessing. The other one will recover, they say. Just thinking about it turns my stomach. A knife is a terrible thing.

You know something funny? Peculiar, I mean—sure God not funny. I swear to you as sure as I'm sitting here that if Jimmy heard of anybody killing women like that it would turn his stomach, too.

He was always a good boy.

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Jon L. Breen is considered one of today's best parodists of the mystery story. The author whom he now parodies is considered one of today's best mystery writers. Thus, a happy combination—the true-read MacB and the true-bred MacD . . .

You'll be interested to know John D. MacD's reaction to Jon L. B's satirical takeoff. The "victim" thought it a "very delicious parody," and he read it, prior to publication, "with pink ears and uncertain smile, the way all authors should read parodies of their stylistic twitches."

A devastating burlesque of "the saga of Trygve McKee" . . .

GREEN GRAVY FOR THE BLUSH

by JON L. BREEN

THE FLUSTERED BLUSH rocked fitfully in her temporary harbor in Ferry Landing, Florida. I felt the bracing Florida breeze on my face and watched the warming Florida sun rise above the glittering glassy faces of the overpriced Florida hotels and brushed away an overeager Florida bug about to take a high dive into my corn flakes. I took a long drag on my Donald Duck orange juice and stared northward toward Battle Creek, Michigan. Your corn flakes aren't what they once were, Battle Creek, and try as you will you cannot disguise the fact by designing a new way to get into the box every year.

But then you aren't what you were, Battle Creek, because you're an American city and American cities are like archaic broads who try to ward off time, that agent of decay, with ever-increasing layers of junk that only heightens what it's trying to conceal. Even Miami has that look these days.

It was one of those mornings when all the sun and all the Donald Duck orange juice in the world can't give balance to the teeter-tauter of my outlook, when my lonely melancholia is so heavy it outweighs soaring birds and flying fish and all the vibrant life around me, and I arise from my bed in my seagoing home full of penetrating social commentary that longs for expression.

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I guess I should have been happy that particular morning. I knew she was ready, my little wounded bird, to fly out again on her own, or as ready as she would ever be. She wasn't scared any more like she was the day I fished her out of the Miami Beach yacht harbor where Chill Warlock had left her to sink.

A broken spirit takes more time to mend than a broken wing, and in the past seven months she hadn't once stepped off the deck of the *Flustered Blush* and into the world outside. But now we knew, as if by mutual consent, that she was ready.

She came out now, still looking like a fragile blonde wisp longing for protection. She sat down beside me shyly and said, "Good morning, Trig."

"Morning, kid."

She reached for a box of raisin bran from the variety pack. She didn't hesitate. She reached for it decisively. I liked that. She looked at it for a second, bewildered. "Trig."

"Yeah, honey?"

"They changed the box again, didn't they?"

"Yeah, I guess they did." I didn't help her. I couldn't. She had to face it herself this time. And I knew she could. I was right. Two minutes later she had it open.

"I didn't lose a single raisin, did I, Trig?"

"You did fine, baby, just fine."

I guess it was a good breakfast, but I didn't taste much. I never do at times like this. Sometimes I could kick myself for being such a sentimentalist. But other times I think that sentimentality is the stuff of which life is made, however much you can lose by it. What you have to know is when to be sentimental and when to be unsentimental. I usually know, but sometimes I'm too damned sentimental to act on what I know.

When she'd finished her breakfast, except for half a glass of her Donald Duck orange juice, she looked at me, unspeaking, not really knowing what to say. She ended up saying just about what they all say.

"Trig, explain to me again what sort of a business you're in. I mean, you haven't had a job in seven months. If you're in the rest-home business you really ought to charge something for your services, even though I can't pay you."

"Well, kid, you might say I'm a knight in faintly tarnished armor, a sort of capitalistic Robin Hood, kind of a sun-drenched Don Quixote."

"Honestly, Trig, you keep

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giving me answers like that, like you were a dust jacket or something. Now if you can't tell me what you and this darling little boat do to keep yourselves afloat, just say so. But I can't help being curious. I mean, are you a detective or a spy or a gunrunner or a smuggler or what?"

"All of those and more."

"Honestly, Trig! You are utterly infuriating!"

"Take it easy, honey. Just relax. It's no secret."

"I want an answer, damn it!" Her voice was tinged with hysteria. "What the hell do you do for a living anyway? I want an answer to that question, a straightforward answer, not an evasion. Is that asking so much of a man I've lived with for seven months?"

"Well, kid, you might say I'm a personal representative."

"That's the last straw!" She picked up her glass of Donald Duck orange juice and heaved it in my face. We stared at each other for a moment, and then she collapsed into weeping. "Oh, Trig, I'm sorry."

"It's all right, honey. Go below now. We were wrong. You aren't quite ready yet."

I had thought she was ready, but occasionally I'm wrong about those things. You might have thought I was provoking her needlessly, and it may be that I was because deep down I wanted her to stay. Actually, what I do for a living is no great secret. But I feel that if she couldn't stand up under this minor amount of friction, she probably couldn't stand up to the Chill Warlocks of the world without more preparation. In my own mind I feel I did the right thing, but then rationalization comes fairly easy even to a realist like me.

Anyway, I decided it would be cruel not to follow her below and explain to her just what it is I do.

"Now, kid," I told her, "this Chill Warlock cheated your father out of a lot of money, didn't he?"

"Yes," she whimpered. "His life savings for that worthless pay-TV stock. Daddy shot himself when he found out."

"Now let's say I was to go out and find Chill Warlock and get back the money—"

"Oh, Trig, would you?"

"Sure, for a price. You see, if I recovered the money I would give you half and would keep half for myself. And that's the business I'm in. That's how I keep the *Flustered Blush* seaworthy."

"Oh, I get it," she said, sniffling. "But, Trig, why didn't you say so before? It would be worth it to me to get back that money."

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"Well, sweetheart, when you first turned up I didn't really need the money. I'd just finished a big job."

"Oh, I see. But, Trig, it's been seven months. By now, who knows where Chill could have gotten to? You could never find him."

I gave her a grim and determined look. "I can find him. And I will find him, kid."

"Oh. Is your money running low?"

"Well, of course, there's that, too. But mainly I can't stand injustice. It makes me sick, and like the twentieth-century Sir Galahad I am, I cannot rest until that injustice has been avenged."

"Trig, in all candor, you did do rather well for seven months—"

"But you needed me. I couldn't leave you."

"And I still need you, Trig! After this morning I know I do."

"Sure, but I can afford to get away for a few days to go after Warlock, while you mind the *Blush*."

"I guess I could, Trig."

"So, can I consider you a client? At the usual percentage?"

"All right, Trig."

"That's the spirit, honey. I'll have the usual contract for you to sign, and by noon I can be out and after Chill Warlock."

"Oh, Trig, you're so good."

Chill Warlock was one of the most undesirable products of our sick society. There have always been swindlers, sure, but there was a day when swindlers had a little class. Chill Warlock was the kind of a man who could beat up a defenseless girl with one hand and sell her father worthless pay-TV stock with the other. You had to say one thing for Chill Warlock—he may have been crude and filthy and ugly and antisocial, but he was one hell of a salesman.

My contacts told me Warlock had been last heard of in Chicago where he was working his pay-TV swindle on a new crop of suckers. An hour later I was on a jet for the so-called Windy City.

Fifty years ago aviation was fun, I suppose. Adventurous. Young men with goggles and the dusty wind blowing their hair climbing into two-cockpit biplanes and smiling for the newsreel cameramen and flying into a great beyond you could feel and taste and if you didn't come back at least you'd done something, experienced something. Now, fat middle-aged businessmen and women and children sit in luxuriously furnished, obscenely spacious jet-powered vehicles and watch

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"Mary Poppins" on the screen and read the *Reader's Digest* and feel pangs of fear about dangers they can't even see. They can still die, but if they die they've done nothing, experienced nothing.

We got into O'Hare Airport in early evening. I put through a call to Tim Dugan, an old friend of mine who was a television commentator in Chicago.

"Tim, this is Trig."

"Trygve McKee! It's good to hear your voice, buddy." It was good to hear his voice, too. It brought back memories of lazy days and fishing amid the Florida Keys, nights of laughter and beautiful girls and sweet life. It brought back to me the beauty that is friendship.

"Tim, I'm on the trail of a chap named Chill Warlock, a very nasty sort of character. He's running a phony pay-TV stock racket. I hear he's in your town."

"He was, Trig. I had him on the program, gave him a hard way to go, told him to shinny up a tree."

"And did he?"

"I understand he shinnied up a Central Park elm tree. I'd like to say more, Trig, but I hate to say anything on the phone. I think they have my line tapped. Come out to the apartment?"

"Sure, Tim. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Okay, buddy. Take two and hit to right."

A yellow cab carried me through the Chicago twilight, but the real way to see Chicago is by El train, whizzing past the hanging laundry of dirty slum backyards and filthy pre-hardened slum kids like some of us were and nobody should have to be. Chicago is that El ride and that El ride is Chicago, because Chi is a dull, decaying, dying town these days, a town with a racy past and no perceptible future. I longed for a little wisp of wind to relieve my boredom.

Tim Dugan lived in a classy apartment on Sheridan Road. The penthouse. Tim doesn't live there any more. Tim doesn't live anywhere any more. Because in the half hour between the time I hung up the phone at the airport and the time I entered the apartment somebody had put an end to Tim Dugan. The big gaping hole in his head left little doubt of this fact.

I didn't know who had done it, but I had a hunch it had to do with Chill Warlock. Then I knew I'd get him. You don't murder Trig McKee's friends and get away with it. Up to now the hunt for Chill Warlock had been strictly business. Now it was pleasure, too.

I thought perhaps I should

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call the police. I dialed headquarters and asked for an old buddy of mine on the Chicago police force. They'd never heard of Captain von Flanagan. Well, there's quite a turnover of police these days. Mostly in dark alleys.

I set out to find Chill Warlock, following the one clue Tim Dugan had given me: an elm tree in Central Park.

There was garbage in the streets in New York. I don't mean that metaphorically; there was a garbage collectors' strike at the time I was there and the stuff was piling up all over town, creating a health hazard. It was a kind of symbol of New York, because there's been garbage in the streets there for a long time and New York's always been a health hazard, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Those pictures you see of New York's skyline may be beautiful and inspiring, but you have to be there to know that what's at the base of those vaunted skyscrapers is ugly and rotten, and that lady with her torch raised heavenward and her welcoming speech carved in stone gets more and more ironic, more and more absurd as the years go by. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores and I will smother them in the ghettos of New York and make the more intelligent of them leaders of the underworld . . ."

New York is full of rats, but there was one rat it didn't have: Chill Warlock. The word was he'd headed west, to California. Only a few minutes after I'd landed at Kennedy Airport, I was watching "Mary Poppins" again.

California is a cheap, gaudy, second-rate imitation of Florida. But then Florida is a cheap, gaudy, second-rate imitation of California, so I guess that's as fair as you could expect in a society like ours that's lost all its values.

San Francisco isn't the biggest city in the United States, but it's easily the most thin-skinned and defensive. It's gotten that way because it knows it's only a shoddy fifth carbon of the city that it once was, when men like me loved it, when men thought of it not as it but as her, a carefree girl with laughing eyes who came strolling out of the fog with a smile of I-don't-give-a-damn on her lips, and you knew that here was one girl who didn't take herself too seriously. But the girl had aged as all girls do, and she tried to remain a girl, which she wasn't. And thus she was not even a woman, not a her at

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all but an it, neuter as all American cities have become. It gave me no pain to see it, for it was an object, not her any more. She was dead.

Oh, by the way, Chill Warlock wasn't in San Francisco either, but I got the word that he'd moved southward to try to sell his phony pay-TV stock in Los Angeles, a town that was full of suckers eager to buy it. The phony sells very well in Los Angeles.

There may have been a day, long gone by, when Los Angeles was a nice place to live. The natives tell me that even today, after a rain, the smog lifts and you can see mountains and the city stretching for miles and L.A. is a beautiful place. But every time I've been there the smog has been thick and oppressive, burning my eyes and my throat. Still, maybe the smog is a good thing, because it's the only thing in L.A. that's not phony.

I caught up with Chill Warlock in a Hollywood television studio where he was being interviewed.

"Mr. Warlock, what are your qualifications as head of a pay-TV company? What TV shows have you ever produced?"

"Well, to that I would say—"

"Why should some poor slob, home from a hard day at the office, have to pay for what he sees on his television screen? Huh?"

"Well, it is our hope—"

"Mr. Warlock, a few years ago there was a proposition on the ballot in California to outlaw pay TV. It was passed by an overwhelming majority. Don't you feel the public has spoken on this question?"

"Well—"

"Mr. Warlock, do you have a college degree?"

"No."

"From where? Some correspondence school in St. Louis?"

"But I said—"

"Mr. Warlock, you sound like a dingaling to me, and I'd like to tell you to take a walk. But I see there's a gentleman in the dock. What's your name, sir?"

"Trygve McKee is my name. I'd like to ask Mr. Warlock a question. Is it true you've tried to peddle pay-TV stock in major cities all over the United States?"

"Well—"

"Is it true this stock is totally worthless?"

"Well, I wouldn't say—"

"Is it true that your company doesn't even exist and that it and you are in fact as phony as everything else in this town?"

At that point we were interrupted by a commercial. I

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could see the beads of perspiration on Chill Warlock's forehead. I knew I was getting to him. His eyes darted back and forth, looking for an exit to run for. Suddenly he was sprinting away. I vaulted over the dock and ran after him. Now I was in my element. Chill Warlock's agile tongue couldn't help him now.

I chased him into the alley outside the studio. I saw that he was stopping and drawing something ugly out of his coat. It looked like a gun. It was, and he was pointing it straight at my head.

"Go ahead, Warlock. Shoot an unarmed man," I taunted him.

"You think I won't? Didn't I beat up a defenseless blonde wisp of a girl? Didn't I steal her father's life savings? Didn't I hire some former F.B.I. men to tap Tim Dugan's wire and kill him if he got too dangerous? You think I wouldn't shoot an unarmed man? Do you think society with its corruptive influences has left me with any trace of conventional morality? Do you think I care for anything but my own skin?"

"That's just it, Chill. If you kill me now, you'll never escape. They'll get you for sure. You're in deep enough trouble already. People don't just walk off the Alvin Turke Show like that. Al Turke doesn't forget."

He was wavering.

"I'll make you a deal, Chill. We go back in and finish the show. Then we split the loot. I go back to the *Flustered Blush* with some green gravy and you do whatever you like."

He considered. "Why should I split with you?"

"Chill, you've heard about me. I'm Trig McKee. You've killed one of my best friends. You've robbed and, indirectly, killed the father of a girl I think a lot of. And you should know that once Trig McKee goes after somebody, he gets him. You don't just kill off McKee's buddies, beat up his women, and flaunt your injustices in his face. Not Trig McKee."

"What are you getting at, McKee?"

"The gist of it is this: it takes a hell of a lot of money to buy me off. You cheated that girl's father out of three hundred bucks. On the whole racket I'd say you've made about fifty thousand. Now, as I figure it, she has a hundred and fifty coming. I want twenty-five grand. The rest is yours. Now let's go back inside. That commercial should be about over."

Chill Warlock put away the gun and we went back inside.

Five months later the *Flus-*

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tered Blush was in her customary slip at Fort Lauderdale. It had been a good five months—in all a good twelve—but now it was clear that she was ready at long last.

"Trig, I hate to leave. I feel I should stay. To take care of you."

"No, honey, the *Blush* and I can take care of ourselves now. I'm feeling stronger with the L.A. smog out of my lungs, and that smashed finger I got fighting with Chill Warlock is as good as new. Besides, I think you're ready now, and for you to stay here would be to stagnate. You have a future, kid, a bright one. You and me was good together, but now it's over."

She brushed away a tear. "All right, Trig. I guess you're right. What can I say? Just thank you, I guess."

She kissed me lightly and got up from her deck chair. She was leaving all right. How many times had the deck of the *Blush* seen this same bittersweet scene? I sighed inwardly. It was going to rain soon. The clouds told me that, and so did the twinge in my finger; somebody'd slammed a car door on it in Las Vegas. There's a great town, by the way. You should go there.

I watched her wispy blonde form walk toward the dock. She turned for a moment and waved shyly; then she took a decisive step away from the *Blush*, toward the great, mean, hungry outside world, and with a loud splash she fell awkwardly into the water.

I shook my head. The poor kid just wasn't ready yet.

AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER: John D. MacDonald's famous character, Travis McGee, is neither a cad nor a scoundrel and bears only superficial resemblances to the hero of this story, which is intended to illustrate how our society has lost its values.

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a TOMMY and TUPPENCE detective story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

In which our old friends Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, master and mistress of the International Detective Agency (alias Blunt's Brilliant Detectives), remember with nostalgia the manners and methods of McCarty. And how many of you remember Isabel Ostrander's detective McCarty? Ah, tempus fugits, and where are the sleuths of yesteryear? . . .

FINESSING THE KING

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

IT WAS A WET WEDNESday in the offices of the International Detective Agency. Tuppence let *The Daily Leader* fall idly from her hand.

"Do you know what I've been thinking, Tommy?"

"It's impossible to say," replied her husband. "You think of so many things, and you think of them all at once."

"I think it's time we went dancing again."

Tommy picked up *The Daily Leader* hastily.

"Our advertisement looks well," he remarked, his head to one side. "Blunt's Brilliant Detectives. Do you realize, Tuppence, that you and you alone are Blunt's Brilliant Detectives? There's glory for you, as Humpty Dumpty would say."

"I was talking about dancing."

"There's a curious point that I have observed about newspapers. I wonder if you have ever noticed it. Take these three copies of *The Daily Leader*. Can you tell me how they differ one from the other?"

Tuppence took them with some curiosity.

"It seems fairly easy," she remarked witheringly. "One is today's, one is yesterday's, and one is the day before's."

"Positively scintillating, my dear Watson. But that was not my meaning. Observe the

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masthead, *The Daily Leader*. Compare the three—do you see any difference between them?"

"No, I don't," said Tuppence, "and what's more, I don't believe there is any."

Tommy sighed, and brought the tips of his fingers together in the most approved Sherlock Holmes fashion.

"Exactly. Yet you read the papers as much—in fact, more than I do. But I have observed and you have not. If you will look at today's *Daily Leader*, you will see that in the middle of the downstroke of the *D* is a small white dot, and there is another in the *l* of the same word. But in yesterday's paper the white dot is not in *Daily* at all. There are two white dots in the *L* of *Leader*. That of the day before again has two dots in the *D* of *Daily*. In fact, the dot, or dots, are in a different position every day."

"Why?" asked Tuppence.

"That's a journalistic secret."

"Meaning you don't know."

"I will merely say this—the practice is common to all newspapers."

"Aren't you clever?" said Tuppence. "Especially at drawing red herrings across the track. Let's go back to what we were talking about before."

"What were we talking about?"

"The Three Arts Ball."

Tommy groaned. "No, no, Tuppence. Not the Three Arts Ball. I'm not young enough. I assure you I'm not young enough."

"When I was a nice young girl," said Tuppence, "I was brought up to believe that men—especially husbands—were dissipated beings, fond of drinking and dancing and staying up late at night. It took an exceptionally beautiful and clever wife to keep them at home. Another illusion gone! All the wives I know are hankering to go out and dance, and weeping because their husbands will wear bedroom slippers and go to bed at half-past nine. And you do dance so nicely, Tommy dear."

"Gently with the butter, Tuppence."

"As a matter of fact," said Tuppence, "it's not purely for pleasure that I want to go. I'm intrigued by this advertisement."

She picked up *The Daily Leader* again, and read: "I should go three hearts. Twelve tricks. Ace of spades. Necessary to finesse the king."

"Rather an expensive way of learning bridge," was Tommy's comment.

"Don't be an ass. That's nothing to do with bridge. You see, I was lunching with a girl

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yesterday at the Ace of Spades. It's a queer little underground den in Chelsea, and she told me that it's quite the fashion at these big shows to trundle round there in the course of the evening for bacon and eggs and Welsh Rabbits—Bohemian sort of stuff. It's got screened-off booths all round it. Pretty hot place, I should say."

"And your idea is—?"

"Three hearts stands for the Three Arts Ball tomorrow night, twelve tricks is twelve o'clock, and the ace of spades is the Ace of Spades."

"And what about its being necessary to finesse the king?"

"Well, that's what I thought we'd find out."

"I shouldn't wonder if you weren't right, Tuppence," said Tommy magnanimously. "But I don't quite see why you want to butt in on other people's love affairs."

"I shan't butt in. What I'm proposing is an interesting experiment in detective work. We *need* practice."

"Business is certainly not too brisk," agreed Tommy. "All the same, Tuppence, what you want is to go to the Three Arts Ball and dance. Talk of red herrings!"

Tuppence laughed shamelessly. "Be a sport, Tommy. Try and forget you're thirty-two and have got one gray hair in your lovely left eyebrow."

"I was always weak where women were concerned," murmured her husband. "Have I got to make an ass of myself in fancy dress?"

"Of course, but you can leave that to me. I've got a splendid idea."

Tommy looked at her with some misgiving. He was always profoundly mistrustful of Tuppence's brilliant ideas.

When he returned to the flat on the following evening, Tuppence came flying out of her bedroom to meet him.

"It's come," she announced.

"What's come?"

"The costume. Come and look at it."

Tommy followed her. Spread out on the bed was a complete fireman's kit with shining helmet.

"Good God!" groaned Tommy. "Have I joined the Wembley fire brigade?"

"Guess again," said Tuppence. "You haven't caught the idea yet. Use your little gray cells, *mon ami.* Scintillate, Watson. Be a bull that has been more than ten minutes in the arena."

"Wait a minute," said Tommy. "I begin to see. There is a dark purpose in this. What are you going to wear, Tuppence?"

"An old suit of your clothes,

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an American hat, and some horn-rim spectacles."

"Crude," said Tommy. "But I catch the idea. McCarty incog. And I am Riordan."

"That's it. I thought we ought to practise American detective methods as well as English ones. Just for once I am going to be the star, and you will be the humble assistant."

"Don't forget," said Tommy warningly, "that it's always an innocent remark by the simple Denny that puts McCarty on the right track."

But Tuppence only laughed. She was in high spirits.

It was a most successful evening. The crowds, the music, the fantastic dresses—everything conspired to make the young couple enjoy themselves. Tommy forgot his role of the bored husband dragged out against his will.

At ten minutes to twelve, they drove off in the car to the famous—or infamous—Ace of Spades. As Tuppence had said, it was an underground den, mean and tawdry in appearance, but it was nevertheless crowded with couples in fancy dress. There were closed-in booths round the walls, and Tommy and Tuppence secured one of these. They left the doors purposely ajar so that they could see what was going on outside.

"I wonder which they are—our people, I mean," said Tuppence. "What about that Columbine over there with the red Mephistopheles?"

"I fancy the wicked Mandarin and the lady who calls herself a Battleship—more of a fast Cruiser, I should say."

"Isn't he witty?" said Tuppence. "All done on a little drop of drink! Who's this coming in dressed as the Queen of Hearts—rather a good get-up, that."

The girl in question passed into the booth next to them accompanied by her escort who was "the Gentleman Dressed in Newspaper" from Alice in Wonderland. They were both wearing masks—it seemed to be rather a common custom at the Ace of Spades.

"I'm sure we're in a real den of iniquity," said Tuppence with a pleased face. "Scandals all round us. What a row everyone makes."

A cry, as of protest, rang out from the next booth and was covered by a man's loud laugh. Everybody was laughing and singing. The shrill voices of the girls rose above the booming of their male escorts.

"What about that Shepherdess?" demanded Tommy. "The one with the comic Frenchman. They might be our little lot."

"Anyone might be," con-

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fessed Tuppence. "I'm not going to bother. The great thing is that we are enjoying ourselves."

"I could have enjoyed myself better in another costume," grumbled Tommy. "You've no idea of the heat of this one."

"Cheer up," said Tuppence. "You look lovely."

"I'm glad of that," said Tommy. "It's more than you do. You're the funniest little guy I've ever seen."

"Will you keep a civil tongue in your head, Denny, my boy. Hullo, the gentleman in newspaper is leaving his lady alone. Where's he going, do you think?"

"Going to hurry up the drinks, I expect," said Tommy. "I wouldn't mind doing the same thing."

"He's a long time doing it," said Tuppence, when five minutes had passed. "Tommy, would you think me an awful ass—" She paused.

Suddenly she jumped up. "Call me an ass if you like. I'm going in the next booth."

"Look here, Tuppence, you can't—"

"I've a feeling there's something wrong. I *know* there is. Don't try and stop me."

She passed quickly out of their own booth, and Tommy followed her. The doors of the next one were closed. Tuppence pushed them apart and went in, Tommy on her heels.

The girl dressed as the Queen of Hearts sat in the corner leaning up against the wall in a queer huddled position. Her eyes regarded them steadily through her mask, but she did not move. Her dress was carried out in a bold design of red and white, but on the left-hand side the pattern seemed to have got mixed. There was more red than should have been.

With a cry Tuppence hurried forward. At the same time Tommy saw what she had seen, the hilt of a jeweled dagger just below the heart. Tuppence dropped on her knees by the girl's side.

"Quick, Tommy, she's still alive. Get hold of the manager and make him get a doctor."

"Right. Mind you don't touch the handle of that dagger, Tuppence."

"I'll be careful. Go quickly."

Tommy hurried out, pulling the doors to behind him. Tuppence passed her arm round the girl. The latter made a faint gesture, and Tuppence realized that she wanted to get rid of the mask. Tuppence unfastened it gently. She saw a fresh flowerlike face, and wide starry eyes that were full of horror, suffering, and a kind of dazed bewilderment.

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"My dear," said Tuppence, very gently. "Can you speak at all? Will you tell me, if you can, who did this?"

She felt the eyes fix themselves on her face. The girl was sighing, the deep palpitating sighs of a failing heart. And still she looked steadily at Tuppence. Then her lips parted.

"Bingo did it—" she said in a strained whisper.

Then her hands relaxed, and she seemed to nestle down on Tuppence's shoulder.

Tommy came in, two men with him. The bigger of the two came forward with an air of authority, doctor written all over him.

Tuppence relinquished her burden.

"She's dead, I'm afraid," she said with a catch in her voice.

The doctor made a swift examination.

"Yes," he said. "Nothing to be done. We had better leave things as they are till the police come. How did the thing happen?"

Tuppence explained rather haltingly, slurring over her reasons for entering the booth.

"It's a curious business," said the doctor. "You heard nothing?"

"I heard her give a kind of cry, but then the man laughed. Naturally, I didn't think—"

"Naturally not," agreed the doctor. "And the man wore a mask, you say. You wouldn't recognize him?"

"I'm afraid not. Would you, Tommy?"

"No. Still, there is his costume."

"The first thing to do is identify this poor lady," said the doctor. "After that, well, I suppose the police will get down to things pretty quickly. It ought not to be a difficult case. Ah, here they come."

It was after three o'clock when, weary and sick at heart, the husband and wife reached home. Several hours passed before Tuppence could sleep. She lay tossing from side to side, seeing always that flower-like face with the horror-stricken eyes.

The dawn was coming in through the shutters when Tuppence finally dropped off to sleep. Then she slept heavily and dreamlessly. It was broad daylight when she awoke to find Tommy, up and dressed, standing by the bedside, shaking her gently by the arm.

"Wake up, old thing. Inspector Marriot and another man are here and want to see you."

"What time is it?"

"Just on eleven. I'll get Alice to bring you your tea right away."

"Yes, do. Tell Inspector

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Marriot I'll be there in ten minutes."

A quarter of an hour later, Tuppence came hurrying into the sitting room. Inspector Marriot, looking very straight and solemn, rose to greet her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Beresford. This is Sir Arthur Merivale."

Tuppence shook hands with a tall thin man who had haggard eyes and graying hair.

"It's about this sad business last night," said Inspector Marriot. "I want Sir Arthur to hear from your own lips what you told me—the words the poor lady said before she died. Sir Arthur has been very hard to convince."

"I can't believe," said the other, "and I won't believe, that Bingo Hale ever hurt a hair on Vere's head."

Inspector Marriot went on: "We've made some progress since last night, Mrs. Beresford. First of all we managed to identify the lady as Lady Merivale. We communicated with Sir Arthur here. He recognized the body at once, and was horrified beyond words, of course. Then I asked him if he knew anyone called Bingo."

"You must understand, Mrs. Beresford," said Sir Arthur, "that Captain Hale, who is known to all his friends as Bingo, is the dearest pal I have. He practically lives with us. He was staying at my house when they arrested him this morning. I cannot but believe that you have made a mistake—it was not his name that my wife uttered."

"There is no possibility of mistake," said Tuppence gently. "She said 'Bingo did it—' "

"You see, Sir Arthur," said Marriot.

The unhappy man sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands. "It's incredible. What earthly motive could there be? Oh, I know your idea, Inspector Marriot. You think Hale was my wife's lover, but even if that were so—which I don't admit for a moment—what motive was there for killing her?"

Inspector Marriot coughed. "It's not a very pleasant thing to say, sir. But Captain Hale has been paying a lot of attention to a certain young American lady of late—a young lady with a considerable amount of money. If Lady Merivale liked to turn nasty, she could probably stop his marriage."

"This is outrageous, Inspector."

Sir Arthur sprang angrily to his feet. The other calmed him with a soothing gesture.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, Sir Arthur. You say that

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you and Captain Hale both decided to attend this show. Your wife was away on a visit at the time, and you had no idea that she was to be there?"

"Not the least idea."

"Just show him that advertisement you told me about, Mrs. Beresford." Tuppence complied. "That seems to me clear enough. It was inserted by Captain Hale to catch your wife's eye. They had already arranged to meet there. But you only made up your mind to go the day before, hence it was necessary to warn her. That is the explanation of the phrase 'Necessary to finesse the king.'

"You ordered your costume from a theatrical firm at the last minute, but Captain Hale's was a homemade affair. He went as the Gentleman Dressed in Newspaper. Do you know, Sir Arthur, what we found clasped in the dead lady's hand? A fragment torn from a newspaper. My men have orders to take Captain Hale's costume away with them from your house. I shall find it at Scotland Yard when I get back. If there's a tear in it corresponding to the missing piece—well, it'll be the end of the case."

"You won't find it," said Sir Arthur. "I know Bingo Hale."

Apologizing to Tuppence for disturbing her, they took their leave.

Late that evening there was a ring at the bell, and somewhat to the astonishment of the young pair, Inspector Marriot once more walked in.

"I thought Blunt's Brilliant Detectives would like to hear the latest developments," he said.

"They would," said Tommy. "Have a drink?"

He placed materials hospitably at Inspector Marriot's elbow.

"It's a clear case," said the Inspector. "Dagger was the lady's own—the idea was to have made it look like suicide, evidently, but thanks to you two being on the spot, that didn't come off. We've found plenty of letters—they'd been carrying on together for some time, that's clear—without Sir Arthur tumbling to it. Then we found the last link—"

"The last what?" said Tuppence sharply.

"The last link in the chain—that fragment of *The Daily Leader*. It was torn from the dress he wore—fits exactly. Oh, yes, it's a perfectly clear case. By the way, I brought round a photograph of those two exhibits—I thought they might interest you. It's very seldom that you get such a perfectly clear case."

"Tommy," said Tuppence, when her husband returned

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from showing the Scotland Yard man out. "Why do you think Inspector Marriot keeps repeating that it's a perfectly clear case?"

"Smug satisfaction, I suppose."

"Not a bit of it. He's trying to get us irritated. You know, Tommy, butchers, for instance, know something about meat, don't they?"

"I should say so, but what on earth—"

"And in the same way, greengrocers know all about vegetables, and fishermen about fish. Detectives, professional detectives, must know all about criminals. They know the real thing when they see it—and they know when it isn't the real thing. Marriot's expert knowledge tells him that Captain Hale isn't a criminal—but all the facts are dead against him. As a last resource Marriot is egging us on, hoping against hope that some little detail or other will come back to us—something that happened last night—which will throw a different light on things. Tommy, why shouldn't it be suicide, after all?"

"Remember what she said to you."

"I know—but take that a different way. It was Bingo's doing—his conduct that drove her to kill herself. It's just possible."

"Just. But it doesn't explain that fragment of newspaper."

"Let's have a look at Marriot's photographs. I forgot to ask him what Hale's account of the matter was."

"I asked him that in the hall just now. Hale declared he never spoke to Lady Merivale at the show. Says somebody shoved a note into his hand which said, 'Don't try and speak to me tonight. Arthur suspects.' He couldn't produce the piece of paper, though, and it doesn't sound a very likely story. Anyway, you and I *know* he was with her at the Ace of Spades because we saw him."

Tuppence nodded and pored over the two photographs. One was a tiny fragment with the legend *Daily Le*—and the rest torn off. The other was the front sheet of *The Daily Leader* with the small round tear at the top of it. There was no doubt about it. The two fitted perfectly.

"What are all those marks down the side?" asked Tommy.

"Stitches," said Tuppence. "Where it was sewn to the other pages, you know."

"I thought it might be a new scheme of dots," said Tommy. Then he gave a slight shiver. "My word, Tuppence, how creepy it makes one feel. To think that you and I were discussing dots and puzzling

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over that advertisement—all as lighthearted as anything."

Tuppence did not answer.

"Tuppence," said Tommy gently, shaking her by the arm. "What's the matter with you?"

But Tuppence remained motionless. Presently she said in a faraway voice, "Dennis Riordan."

"Eh?" said Tommy.

"It's just as you said. One simple innocent remark! Find me all this week's *Daily Leaders.*"

"What are you up to?"

"I'm being McCarty. I've been worrying round, and thanks to you I've got a notion at last. This is the front page of Tuesday's paper. I seem to remember that Tuesday's paper was the one with two dots in the *L* of *Leader.* This has a dot in the *D* of *Daily*—and one in the *l*, too. Get me the papers and let's make sure."

They compared them anxiously. Tuppence had been quite right in her remembrance.

"You see? This fragment wasn't torn from Tuesday's paper."

"But, Tuppence, we can't be sure. It may merely be different editions."

"It may—but at any rate it's given me an idea. It can't be coincidence—that's certain. There's only one thing it can be if I'm right in my idea. Ring up Sir Arthur, Tommy. Ask him to come round here at once. Say I've got important news for him. Then get hold of Marriot. Scotland Yard will know his address if he's gone home."

Sir Arthur Merivale, very much intrigued by the summons, arrived at the flat in about half an hour's time. Tuppence greeted him.

"I must apologize for sending for you in such a peremptory fashion," she said. "But my husband and I have discovered something that we think you ought to know at once. Do sit down."

Sir Arthur sat down, and Tuppence went on. "You are, I know, very anxious to clear your friend."

Sir Arthur shook his head sadly. "I was, but even I have had to give in to the overwhelming evidence."

"What would you say if I told you that chance has placed in my hands a piece of evidence that will certainly clear him of all complicity?"

"I should be overjoyed to hear it, Mrs. Beresford."

"Supposing," continued Tuppence, "that I had come across a girl who was actually dancing with Captain Hale last night at twelve o'clock—the hour when he was supposed to be at the Ace of Spades."

"Marvelous," cried Sir Ar-

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thur. "I knew there was some mistake. Poor Vere must have killed herself after all."

"Hardly that," said Tuppence. "You forget the other man."

"What other man?"

"The one my husband and I saw leave the booth. You see, Sir Arthur, there must have been a second man dressed in newspaper. By the way, what was your own costume?"

"Mine? I went as a Seventeenth Century Executioner."

"How very appropriate," said Tuppence softly.

"Appropriate, Mrs. Beresford? What do you mean?"

"For the part you played. Shall I tell you my ideas on the subject, Sir Arthur? The newspaper dress is easily put on over that of an Executioner. Previously a little note has been slipped into Captain Hale's hand, asking him not to speak to a certain lady. But the lady herself knows nothing of that note. She goes to the Ace of Spades at the appointed time, and sees the figure she expects to see. They go into the booth. He takes her in his arms, I think, and kisses her—and as he kisses he strikes with the dagger. She only utters one faint cry and he covers that with a laugh. Presently he goes away—and to the last, horrified and bewildered, *she believes her lover is the man who killed her.*

"But she has torn a small fragment from the killer's costume. The murderer notices that—he is a man who pays great attention to detail. To make the case absolutely clear against his victim the fragment must seem to have been torn from Captain Hale's costume. That would present great difficulties unless the two men happened to be living in the same house. Then, of course, the thing would be simplicity itself. He makes an exact duplicate of the tear in Captain Hale's costume—then he burns his own and prepares to play the part of the loyal friend."

Sir Arthur rose and bowed. "The rather vivid imagination of a charming lady who reads too much fiction."

"You think so?" said Tommy.

"And a husband who is guided by his wife," said Sir Arthur. "I do not fancy you will find anybody to take the matter seriously."

He laughed out loud, and Tuppence stiffened in her chair.

"I would swear to that laugh anywhere," she said. "I heard it last in the Ace of Spades. And you are under a little misapprehension about us both. Beresford is our real name, but we have another."

She picked up a card from

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the table and handed it to him. Sir Arthur read it aloud, "International Detective Agency." He drew his breath sharply. "So that is what you really are! That was why Marriot brought me here this morning. It was a trap—"

He strolled to the window.

"A fine view you have from here," he said. "Right over London."

"Inspector Marriot!" Tommy called out sharply.

In a flash the Inspector appeared from the communicating door.

A little smile of amusement came to Sir Arthur's lips.

"I thought as much," he said. "But you won't get me this time, I'm afraid, Inspector. I prefer my own way out."

And putting his hands on the sill he vaulted clean through the window.

Tuppence shrieked and clapped her hands to her ears to shut out the sound she had already imagined—the sickening thud far beneath. Inspector Marriot uttered an oath.

"We should have thought of the window," he said. "Though, mind you, it would have been a difficult thing to prove, I'll go down and—and—see to things."

"Poor devil," said Tommy slowly. "If he was fond of his wife—"

But the Inspector interrupted him with a snort. "Fond of her? That's as may be. He was at his wits' end where to turn for money. Lady Merivale had a large fortune of her own, and it all went to him. If she'd bolted with young Hale, he'd never have seen a penny of it."

"That was it, was it?"

"Of course. From the very start I sensed that Sir Arthur was a bad lot, and that Captain Hale was all right. We know pretty well what's what at the Yard—but it's awkward when you're up against seemingly incontrovertible facts. I'll be going down now—I should give your wife a glass of brandy if I were you, Mr. Beresford—it's been upsetting-like for her."

"Greengrocers," said Tuppence in a low voice as the door closed behind the imperturbable Inspector. "Butchers. Fishermen. Detectives. I was right, wasn't I? Marriot knew."

Tommy, who had been busy at the sideboard, approached her with a large glass.

"Drink this."

"What is it? Brandy?"

"No, it's a large cocktail—suitable for a triumphant McCarty. Yes, Marriot's right—that was the way of it. A bold finesse for game and rubber."

Tuppence nodded. "But he finessed the wrong way round."

"And so," said Tommy. "Exit the King."

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a NEW crime story by

NEDRA TYRE

Nedra Tyre's newest story is unusual—but, then, all Nedra Tyre's stories are unusual. This one is beautifully written—but, then, all Nedra Tyre's stories are beautifully, some exquisitely, written. In this one you will get to know Baby and her unlucky husbands, and you will remember Baby for a long time. And speaking of time, that's unusual, too: if our memory is still trustworthy, "Recipe for a Happy Marriage" is the first St. Valentine's Day mystery ever to appear in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine—a notable first . . .

(Alas, our memory is definitely not trustworthy. Even before the editorial introduction above could be set in type, we came upon "Murder on St. Valentine's Day" by Mignon G. Eberhart, in the March 1957 issue of EQMM. Still, 14 years can be a relatively long time. And the day still is an unusual one for murder . . .)

RECIPE FOR A HAPPY MARRIAGE

by NEDRA TYRE

TODAY IS JUST NOT MY day.

And it's not even noon.

Maybe it will take a turn for the better.

Anyway, it's foolish to be upset.

That girl from the *Bulletin* who came to interview me a little while ago was nice enough. I just wasn't expecting her. And I surely wasn't expecting Eliza McIntyre to trip into my bedroom early this morning and set her roses down on my bedside table with such an air about her as if I'd broken my foot for the one and only purpose of having her arrive at seven thirty to bring me a bouquet. She's been coming often enough since I broke my foot, but never before eleven or twelve in the morning.

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That young woman from the *Bulletin* sat right down, and before she even smoothed her skirt or crossed her legs she looked straight at me and asked if I had a recipe for a happy marriage. I think she should at least have started off by saying it was a nice day or asking how I felt, especially as it was perfectly obvious that I had a broken foot.

I told her that I certainly didn't have any recipe for a happy marriage, but I'd like to know why I was being asked, and she said it was almost St. Valentine's Day and she had been assigned to write a feature article on love, and since I must know more about love than anybody else in town she and her editor thought that my opinions should have a prominent place in the article.

Her explanation put me more out of sorts than her question. But whatever else I may or may not be I'm a good-natured woman. I suppose it was my broken foot that made me feel irritable.

At that very moment Eliza's giggle came way up the back stairwell from the kitchen, and it was followed by my husband's laughter, and I heard dishes rattle and pans clank, and all that added fire to my irritability.

The one thing I can't abide, never have been able to stand, is to have somebody in my kitchen. Stay out of my kitchen and my pantry, that's my motto. People always seem to think they're putting things back in the right place, but they never do. How well I remember Aunt Mary Ellen saying she just wanted to make us a cup of tea and to cut some slices of lemon to go with it. I could have made that tea as well as she did, but she wouldn't let me. I couldn't tell a bit of difference between her tea and mine, yet she put my favorite paring knife some place or other and it didn't turn up until eight months later, underneath a stack of cheese graters. That was a good twenty years ago and poor Aunt Mary Ellen has been in her grave for ten, and yet I still think about that paring knife and get uneasy when someone is in my kitchen.

Well, that young woman leaned forward and had an equally dumfounding question. She asked me just which husband I had now.

I don't look at things—at husbands—like that. So I didn't answer her. I was too aghast. And then again from the kitchen came the sound of Eliza's giggle and Lewis' whoop.

I've known Eliza Moore, now Eliza McIntyre, all my life. In school she was two grades ahead of me from the very

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beginning, but the way she tells it now she was three grades behind me; but those school records are somewhere, however yellowed and crumbled they may be, and there's no need for Eliza to try to pretend she's younger than I am when she's two years older. Not that it matters. I just don't want her in my kitchen.

That young woman was mistaking my silence. She leaned close as if I were either deaf or a very young child who hadn't paid attention. How many times have you been married? she asked in a very loud voice.

When she put it like that, how could I answer her? Husbands aren't like teacups. I can't count them off and gloat over them the way Cousin Lutie used to stand in front of her china cabinets, saying she had so many of this pattern and so many of that.

For goodness' sake, I had them one at a time, a husband at a time, and perfectly legally. They all just died on me. I couldn't stay the hand of fate. I was always a sod widow—there weren't any grass widows in our family. As Mama said, it runs in our family to be with our husbands till death us do part. The way that girl put her question, it sounded as if I had a whole bunch of husbands at one time like a line of chorus men in a musical show.

I didn't know how to answer her. I lay back on my pillows with not a word to say, as if the cat had run off with my tongue.

It's sheer accident that I ever married to begin with. I didn't want to. Not that I had anything against marriage or had anything else special to do. But Mama talked me into it. Baby, she said, other women look down on women who don't marry. Besides, you don't have any particular talent and Aunt Sallie Mae, for all her talk, may not leave you a penny. I don't think she ever forgave me for not naming you after her, and all her hinting about leaving you her money may just be her spiteful way of getting back at me.

Besides, Mama said, the way she's held on to her money, even if she did leave it to you, there would be so many strings attached you'd have to have a corps of Philadelphia lawyers to read the fine print before you could withdraw as much as a twenty-five-cent piece. If I were you, Baby, Mama said, I'd go and get married. If you don't marry you won't get invited any place except as a last resort, when they need somebody at the last minute to keep from having thirteen at table. And it's nice to have somebody to

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open the door for you and carry your packages. A husband can be handy.

So I married Ray.

Well, Ray and I hadn't been married six months when along came Mama with a handkerchief in her hand and dabbing at her eyes. Baby, she said, the wife is always the last one to know. I've just got to tell you what everyone is talking about. I know how good you are and how lacking in suspicion, but the whole town is buzzing. It's Ray and Marjorie Brown.

Ray was nice and I was fond of him. He called me Lucy-honey, exactly as if it were one word. Sometimes for short he called me Lucyhon. He didn't have much stamina or backbone—how could he when he was the only child and spoiled rotten by his mother and grandma and three maiden aunts?

Baby, Mama said, and her tears had dried and she was now using her handkerchief to fan herself with, don't you be gullible. I can't stand for you to be mistreated or betrayed. Should I go to the rector and tell him to talk to Ray and point out where his duty lies? Or should I ask your Uncle Jonathan to talk to Ray man-to-man?

I said, Mama, it's nobody's fault but my own. For heaven's sake let Ray do what he wants to do. He doesn't need anyone to tell him when he can come and go and what persons he can see. It's his house and he's paying the bills. Besides, his taking up with Marjorie Brown is no discredit to me—she's a lot prettier than I am. I think it's romantic and spunky of Ray. Why, Marjorie Brown is a married woman. Her husband might shoot Ray.

I don't know exactly what it was that cooled Ray down. He was back penitent and sheep-eyed, begging forgiveness. I'm proud of you, Ray, I said. Why, until you married me you were so timid you wouldn't have said boo to a goose and here you've been having an illicit affair. I think it's grand. Marjorie Brown's husband might have horsewhipped you.

Ray grinned and said, I really have picked me a wife.

And he never looked at another woman again as long as he lived. Which unfortunately wasn't very long.

I got to thinking about him feeling guilty and apologizing to me, when I was the one to blame—I hadn't done enough for him, and I wanted to do something real nice for him, so I thought of that cake recipe. Except we called it a receipt. It had been in the family for years—centuries you might say,

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solemnly handed down from mother to daughter, time out of mind.

And so when that girl asked me whether I had a recipe for a happy marriage I didn't give the receipt a thought. Besides, I'm sure she didn't mean an actual recipe, but some kind of formula like let the husband know he's boss, or some such foolishness.

Anyway, there I was feeling penitent about not giving Ray the attention he should have had so that he was bored enough by me to go out and risk his life at the hands of Marjorie Brown's jealous husband.

So I thought, well, it's the hardest receipt I've ever studied and has more ingredients than I've ever heard of, but it's the least I can do for Ray. So I went here and there to the grocery stores, to drug stores, to apothecaries, to people who said, good Lord, no, we don't carry that but if you've got to have it try so-and-so, who turned out to be somebody way out in the country that looked at me as if I asked for the element that would turn base metal into gold and finally came back with a little packet and a foolish question as to what on earth I needed that for.

Then I came on back home and began grinding and pounding and mixing and baking and sitting in the kitchen waiting for the mixture to rise. When it was done it was the prettiest thing I had ever baked.

I served it for dessert that night.

Ray began to eat the cake and to savor it and to say extravagant things to me, and when he finished the first slice he said, Lucyhon, may I have another piece, a big one, please.

Why, Ray, it's all yours to eat as you like, I said.

After a while he pushed the plate away and looked at me with a wonderful expression of gratitude on his face and he said, oh, Lucyhoney, I could die happy. And as far as I know he did.

When I tapped on his door the next morning to give him his first cup of coffee and open the shutters and turn on his bath water he was dead, and there was the sweetest smile on his face.

But that young woman was still looking at me while I had been reminiscing, and she was fluttering her notes and wetting her lips with her tongue like a speaker with lots of things to say. And she sort of bawled out at me as if I were an entire audience whose attention had strayed: Do you think that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach?

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Excuse me, young lady, I wanted to say, but I never heard of Cleopatra saying to Mark Antony or any of the others she favored, here, won't you taste some of my potato salad, and I may be wrong because my reading of history is skimpy, but it sounds a little unlikely that Madame de Pompadour ever whispered into the ear of Louis the Fifteenth, I've baked the nicest casserole for you.

My not answering put the girl off, and I felt that I ought to apologize, yet I couldn't bring myself around to it.

She glanced at her notes to the next question, and was almost beet-red from embarrassment when she asked: Did the financial situation of your husbands ever have anything to do with your marrying them?

I didn't even open my mouth. I was as silent as the tomb. Her questions kept getting more and more irrelevant. And I was getting more stupefied as her eyes kept running up and down her list of questions.

She tried another one: What do you think is the best way to get a husband?

Now that's a question I have never asked myself and about which I have nothing to offer anybody in a St. Valentine's Day article or elsewhere. I have never gone out to *get* a husband. I haven't ever, as that old-fashioned expression has it, set my cap for anybody.

Take Lewis who is this minute in the kitchen giggling with Eliza McIntyre. I certainly did not set out to get him. It was some months after Alton—no, Edward—had died, and people were trying to cheer me up, not that I needed any cheering up. I mean, after all the losses I've sustained I've become philosophical. But my Cousin Wanda's grandson had an exhibition of paintings. The poor deluded boy isn't talented, not a bit. All the same I bought two of his paintings that are downstairs in the hall closet, shut off from all eyes.

Anyway, at the opening of the exhibition there was Lewis looking all forlorn. He had come because the boy was a distant cousin of his dead wife. Lewis leaped up from a bench when he got a glimpse of me and said, why, Lucy, I haven't seen you in donkey's years, and we stood there talking while everybody was going ooh and aah over the boy's paintings, and Lewis said he was hungry and I asked him to come on home with me and have a bite to eat.

I fixed a quick supper and Lewis ate like a starving man, and then we sat in the back

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parlor and talked about this and that, and about midnight he said, Lucy, I don't want to leave. This is the nicest feeling I've ever had, being here with you. I don't mean to be disrespectful to the dead, but there wasn't any love lost between Ramona and me. I'd like to stay on here forever.

Well, after that—after a man's revealed his innermost thoughts to you—you can't just show him the door. Besides, I couldn't put him out because it was beginning to snow, and in a little while the snow turned to sleet. He might have fallen and broken his neck going down the front steps and I'd have had that on my conscience the rest of my life.

Lewis, I said, it seems foolish at this stage of the game for me to worry about my reputation, but thank heaven Cousin Alice came down from Washington for the exhibition and is staying with me, and she can chaperon us until we can make things perfectly legal and aboveboard.

That's how it happened.

You don't plan things like that, I wanted to tell the girl. They happen in spite of you. So it's silly of you to ask me what the best way is to get a husband.

My silence hadn't bothered her a bit. She sort of closed one eye like somebody about to take aim with a rifle and asked: Exactly how many times have you been married?

Well, she had backed up. She was repeating herself. That was practically the same question she had asked me earlier. It had been put a little differently this time, that was all.

I certainly had no intention of telling her the truth, which was that I wasn't exactly sure myself. Sometimes my husbands become a little blurred and blended. Sometimes I have to sit down with pencil and paper and figure it out.

Anyhow, that's certainly no way to look at husbands—the exact number or the exact sequence.

My husbands were an exceptional bunch of men, if I do say so. And fine-looking, too. Even Art, who had a harelip. And they were all good providers. Rich and didn't mind spending their money—not like some rich people. Not that I needed money. Because Aunt Sallie Mae, for all Mama's suspicions, left me hers, and there was nothing spiteful about her stipulations. I could have the money when, as, and how I wanted it.

Anyway, I never have cared about money or what it could buy for me.

There's nothing much I can spend it on for myself. Jewelry

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doesn't suit me. My fingers are short and stubby and my hands are square—no need to call attention to them by wearing rings. Besides, rings bother me. I like to cook and rings get in the way. Necklaces choke me and earrings pinch. As for fur coats, mink or chinchilla or just plain squirrel—well, I don't like the idea of anything that has lived ending up draped around me.

So money personally means little to me. But it's nice to pass along. Nothing gives me greater pleasure, and there's not a husband of mine who hasn't ended up without having a clinic or a college library or a hospital wing or a research laboratory or something of the sort founded in his honor and named after him. Sometimes I've had to rob Peter to pay Paul. I mean, some of them have left more than others and once in a while I've had to take some of what one left me to pay on the endowment for another. But it all evened itself out.

Except for Buster. There was certainly a nice surplus where Buster was concerned. He lived the shortest time and left me the most money of any of my husbands. For every month I lived with him I inherited a million dollars. Five.

My silent reminiscing like that wasn't helping the girl with her St. Valentine's Day article. If I had been in anybody's house and the hostess was as taciturn as I was, I'd have excused myself and reached for the knob of the front door.

But, if anything, that young lady became even more impertinent.

Have you had a favorite among your husbands? she asked and her tongue flicked out like a snake's.

I was silent even when my husbands asked that question. Sometimes they would show a little jealousy for their predecessors and make unkind remarks. But naturally I did everything in my power to reassure whoever made a disparaging remark about another.

All my husbands have been fine men, I would say in such a case, but I do believe you're the finest of the lot. I said it whether I really thought so or not.

But I had nothing at all to say to that girl on the subject.

Yet if I ever got to the point of being forced to rank my husbands, I guess Luther would be very nearly at the bottom of the list. He was the only teetotaler in the bunch. I hadn't noticed how he felt about drink until after we were married—that's when things you've overlooked during courtship

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can confront you like a slap in the face. Luther would squirm when wine was served to guests during a meal, and his eyes looked up prayerfully toward heaven when anybody took a second glass. At least he restrained himself to the extent of not saying any word of reproach to a guest, but Mama said she always expected him to hand around some of those tracts that warn against the pitfalls that lie in wait for drunkards.

Poor man. He was run over by a beer truck.

The irony of it, Mama said. There's a lesson in it for us all. And it was broad daylight, she said, shaking her head, not even dark, so that we can't comfort ourselves that Luther didn't know what hit him.

Not long after Luther's unfortunate accident Matthew appeared—on tiptoe, you might say. He was awfully short and always stretched himself to look taller. He was terribly apologetic about his height. I'd ask you to marry me, Lucy, he said, but all your husbands have been over six feet tall. Height didn't enter into it, I told him, and it wasn't very long before Matthew and I were married.

He seemed to walk on tiptoe and I scrunched down, and still there was an awful gap between us, and he would go on about Napoleon almost conquering the world in spite of being short. I started wearing low-heeled shoes and walking hunched over, and Mama said, for God's sake, Baby, you can push tact too far. You never were beautiful but you had an air about you and no reigning queen ever had a more elegant walk, and here you are slumping. Your Aunt Francine was married to a midget, as you well know, but there wasn't any of this bending down and hunching over. She let him be his height and he let her be hers. So stop this foolishness.

But I couldn't. I still tried literally to meet Matthew more than halfway. And I had this feeling—well, why shouldn't I have it, seeing as how they had all died on me—that Matthew wasn't long for this world, and it was my duty to make him feel as important and as tall as I possibly could during the little time that was left to him.

Matthew died happy. I have every reason to believe it. But then, as Mama said, they all died happy.

Never again, Mama, I said. Never again. I feel like Typhoid Mary or somebody who brings doom on men's heads.

Never is a long time, Mama said.

And she was right. I married Hugh.

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I think it was Hugh.

Two things I was proud of and am proud of. I never spoke a harsh word to any one of my husbands and I never did call one of them by another's name, and that took a lot of doing because after a while they just all sort of melted together in my mind.

After every loss, Homer was the greatest solace and comfort to me. Until he retired last year Homer was the Medical Examiner, and he was a childhood friend, though I never saw him except in his line of duty, you might say. It's the law here, and perhaps elsewhere, that if anyone dies unattended or from causes that aren't obvious, the Medical Examiner must be informed.

The first few times I had to call Homer I was chagrined. I felt apologetic, a little like calling the doctor up in the middle of the night when, however much the pain may be troubling you, you're afraid it's a false alarm and the doctor will hold it against you for disturbing his sleep.

But Homer always was jovial when I called him. I guess that's not the right word. Homer was reassuring, not jovial. Anytime, Lucy, anytime at all, he would say when I began to apologize for having to call him.

I think it was right after Sam died. Or was it Carl? It could have been George. Anyway, Homer was there reassuring me as always, and then this look of sorrow or regret clouded his features. It's a damned pity, Lucy, he said, you can't work me in somewhere or other. You weren't the prettiest little girl in the third grade, or the smartest, but damned if from the beginning there hasn't been something about you. I remember, he said, that when we were in the fourth grade I got so worked up over you that I didn't pass a single subject but arithmetic and had to take the whole term over. Of course you were promoted, so for the rest of my life you've been just out of my reach.

Why, Homer, I said, that's the sweetest thing anybody has ever said to me.

I had it in the back of my mind once the funeral was over and everything was on an even keel again that I'd ask Homer over for supper one night. But it seemed so calculating, as if I was taking him up on that sweet remark he had made about wishing I had worked him in somewhere among my husbands. So I decided against it.

Instead I married Beau Green.

There they go laughing again—Eliza and Lewis down in

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the kitchen. *My* kitchen.

It's funny that Eliza has turned up in my kitchen, acting very much at home, when she's the one and only person in this town I never have felt very friendly toward—at least, not since word got to me that she had said I snatched Beau Green right from under her nose.

That wasn't a nice thing for her to say. Besides, there wasn't a word of truth in it. I'd like to see the man that can be snatched from under anybody's nose unless he wanted to be.

Eliza was surely welcome to Beau Green if she had wanted him and if he had wanted her.

Why, I'd planned to take a trip around the world, already had my tickets and reservations, and had to put it off for good because Beau wouldn't budge any farther away from home than to go to Green River—named for his family—to fish. I really wanted to take that cruise—had my heart especially set on seeing the Taj Mahal by moonlight; but Beau kept on saying if I didn't marry him he would do something desperate, which I took to mean he'd kill himself or take to drink. So I canceled all those reservations and turned in all those tickets and married him.

Well, Eliza would certainly have been welcome to Beau.

I've already emphasized that I don't like to rank my husbands, but in many ways Beau was the least satisfactory one I ever had. It was his nature to be a killjoy—he had no sense of the joy of living and once he set his mind on something he went ahead with it, no matter if it pleased anybody else or not.

He knew good and well I didn't care for jewelry. But my preference didn't matter to Beau Green, not one bit. Here he came with this package and I opened it. I tried to muster all my politeness when I saw that it was a diamond. Darling, I said, you're sweet to give me a present, but this is a little bit big, isn't it?

It's thirty-seven carats, he said.

I felt like I ought to take it around on a sofa pillow instead of wearing it, but I did wear it twice and felt as conspicuous and as much of a showoff as if I'd been waving a peacock fan around and about.

It was and is my habit when I get upset with someone to go to my room and write my grievances down and get myself back in a good humor, just as I'm doing now because of that girl's questions; but sometimes it seemed like there wasn't enough paper in the world on which to write down my complaints against Beau.

Then I would blame myself.

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Beau was just being Beau. Like all God's creatures he was behaving the way he was made, and I felt so guilty that I decided I ought to do something for him to show I really loved and respected him, as deep in my heart I did.

So I decided to make him a cake by that elaborate recipe that had been in our family nobody is sure for how long. I took all one day to do the shopping for it. The next day I got up at five and stayed in the kitchen until late afternoon.

Well, Beau was a bit peckish when it came to eating the cake. Yet he had the sweetest tooth of any of my husbands.

Listen, darling, I said when he was mulish about eating it, I made this special for you—it's taken the best part of two days. I smiled at him and asked wouldn't he please at least taste it to please me. Really, I was put out when I thought of all the work that had gone into it. For one terrible second I wished it were a custard pie and I could throw it right in his face, like in one of those old Keystone comedies; and then I remembered that we were sworn to cherish each other, so I just put one arm around his shoulder and with my free hand I pushed the cake a little closer and said, Belle wants Beau to eat at least one small bite. Belle was a foolish pet name he sometimes called me because he thought it was clever for him to be Beau and for me to be Belle.

He looked sheepish and picked up his fork and I knew he was trying to please me, the way I had tried to please him by wearing that thirty-seven carat diamond twice.

Goodness, Belle, he said, when he swallowed his first mouthful, this is delicious.

Now, darling, you be careful, I said. That cake is rich.

Best thing I ever ate, he said, and groped around on the plate for the crumbs, and I said, darling, wouldn't you like a little coffee to wash it down?

He didn't answer, just sat there smiling. Then after a little he said he was feeling numb. I can't feel a thing in my feet, he said. I ran for the rubbing alcohol and pulled off his shoes and socks and started rubbing his feet, and there was a sort of spasm and his toes curled under, but nothing affected that smile on his face.

Homer, I said a little later—because of course I had to telephone him about Beau's death—what on earth is it? Could it be something he's eaten? And Homer said, what do you mean, something he's eaten? Of course not. You set the best table in the county. You're famous for your cook-

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ing. It couldn't be anything he's eaten. Don't be foolish, Lucy. He began to pat me on the shoulder and he said, I read a book about guilt and loss and it said the bereaved often hold themselves responsible for the deaths of their beloved ones. But I thought you had better sense than that, Lucy.

Homer was a little bit harsh with me that time.

Julius Babb settled Beau's estate. Beau left you a tidy sum all right, he said, and I wanted to say right back at him but didn't: not as tidy as most of the others left me.

Right then that young woman from the *Bulletin* repeated her last question.

Have you had a favorite among your husbands? Her tone was that of a prosecuting attorney and had nothing to do with a reporter interested in writing about love for St. Valentine's Day.

I had had enough of her and her questions. I dragged myself up to a sitting position in the bed. Listen here, young lady, I said. It looks as if I've gotten off on the wrong foot with you—and then we both laughed at the pun I had made.

The laughter put us both in a good humor and then I tried to explain that I had an unexpected caller downstairs who needed some attention, and that I really was willing to cooperate on the St. Valentine's Day article; but all those questions at first hearing had sort of stunned me. It was like taking an examination and finding all the questions a surprise. I told her if she would leave her list with me I'd mull over it, and she could come back tomorrow and I'd be prepared with my answers and be a little more presentable than I was now, wearing a rumpled wrapper and with my hair uncombed.

Well, she was as sweet as apple pie and handed over the list of questions and said she hoped that ten o'clock tomorrow morning would be fine; and I said, yes, it would.

There goes Eliza's laugh again. It's more of a caw than a laugh. I shouldn't think that. But it's been such a strange day, with that young reporter being here and Eliza showing up so early.

Come to think of it, Eliza has done very well for herself, as far as marrying goes. That reporter should ask Eliza some of those questions.

Mama was a charitable woman all her life and she lived to be eighty-nine, but Eliza always rubbed Mama's skin the wrong way. To tell the truth, Eliza rubbed the skin of all the women in this town the wrong

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way. It's not right, Baby, Mama said, when other women have skimped and saved and cut corners all their lives and then when they're in their last sickness here comes Eliza getting her foot in the door just because she's a trained nurse. Then the next thing you hear, Eliza has married the widower and gets in one fell swoop what it took the dead wife a lifetime to accumulate.

That wasn't the most generous way in the world for Mama to put it, but I've heard it put much harsher by others. Mrs. Perkerson across the street, for one. Eliza is like a vulture, Mrs. Perkerson said. First she watches the wives die, then she marries, and then she watches the husbands die. Pretty soon it's widow's weeds for Eliza and a nice-sized bank account, not to mention some of the most valuable real estate in town.

Why, Mrs. Perkerson said the last time I saw her, I know that Lois Eubanks McIntyre is turning in her grave thinking of Eliza inheriting that big estate, with gardens copied after the Villa d'Este. And they tell you nursing is hard work.

I hadn't seen Eliza in some time. We were friendly enough, but not real friends, never had been, and I was especially hurt after hearing what she said about me taking Beau Green away from her. But we would stop and chat when we bumped into each other downtown, and then back off smiling and saying we must get together. But nothing ever came of it.

And then three weeks ago Eliza telephoned and I thought for sure somebody was dead. But, no, she was as sweet as magnolia blossoms and cooing as if we saw each other every day, and she invited me to come by that afternoon for a cup of tea or a glass of sherry. I asked her if there was anything special, and she said she didn't think there had to be any special reason for old friends to meet, but, yes, there was something special. She wanted me to see her gardens—of course they weren't her gardens, except by default, they were Lois Eubanks McIntyre's gardens—which she had opened for the Church Guild Benefit Tour and I hadn't come. So she wanted me to see them that afternoon.

It was all so sudden that she caught me off guard. I didn't want to go and there wasn't any reason for me to go, but for the life of me I couldn't think of an excuse not to go. And so I went.

The gardens really were beautiful. And I'm crazy about flowers.

Eliza gave me a personally

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guided tour. There were lots of paths and steep steps and unexpected turnings, and I was so delighted by the flowers that I foolishly didn't pay attention to my footing. I wasn't used to walking on so much gravel or going up and down uneven stone steps and Eliza didn't give me any warning.

Then all of a sudden, it was the strangest feeling, not as if I'd fallen but as if I'd been pushed, and there Eliza was leaning over me saying she could never forgive herself for not telling me about the broken step, and I was to lie right there and not move until the doctor could come, and what a pity it was that what she had wanted to be a treat for me had turned into a tragedy. Which was making a whole lot more out of it than need be because it was only a broken foot—not that it hasn't been inconvenient.

But Eliza has been fluttering around for three weeks saying that I should sue her as she carried liability insurance, and anyway it was lucky she was a nurse and could see that I got devoted attention. I don't need a nurse, but she has insisted on coming every day, and on some days several times; she seems to be popping in and out of the house like a cuckoo clock.

I had better get on with that reporter's questions.

Do you have a recipe for a happy marriage?

I've already told her I don't, and of course there's no such thing as a recipe for a happy marriage; but I could tell her this practice I have of working through my grievances and dissatisfactions by writing down what bothers me and then tearing up what I've written. For all I know it might work for somebody else, too.

I didn't hear Eliza coming up the stairs. It startled me when I looked up and saw her at my bedside. What if she discovered I was writing about her? What if she grabbed the notebook out of my hands and started to read it? There isn't a thing I could do to stop her.

But she just smiled and asked if I was ready for lunch and she hoped I'd worked up a good appetite. How on earth she thinks I could have worked up an appetite by lying in bed I don't know, but that's Eliza for you, and all she had fixed was canned soup and it wasn't hot.

All I wanted was just to blot everything out—that girl's questions, Eliza's presence in my home, my broken foot.

I would have thought that I couldn't have gone to sleep in a thousand years. But I was so drowsy that I couldn't even close the notebook, much less hide it under the covers.

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I don't know what woke me up. It was pitch-dark, but dark comes so soon these winter days you can't tell whether it's early dark or midnight.

I felt refreshed after my long nap and equal to anything. I was ready to answer any question on that girl's list.

The notebook was still open beside me and I thought that if Eliza had been in here and had seen what I had written about her it served her right.

Then from the kitchen rose a wonderful smell and there was a lot of noise downstairs. Suddenly the back stairway and hall were flooded with light, and then Eliza and Lewis were at my door and they were grinning and saying they had a surprise for me. Then Lewis turned and picked up something from a table in the hall and brought it proudly toward me. I couldn't tell what it was. It was red and heart-shaped and had something white on top. At first I thought it might be a hat, and then I groped for my distance glasses, but even with them on I still couldn't tell what Lewis was carrying.

Lewis held out the tray. It's a St. Valentine's Day cake, he said, and Eliza said, we iced it and decorated it for you; then Lewis tilted it gently and I saw L U C Y in wobbly letters spread all across the top.

I don't usually eat sweets. So their labor of love was lost on me. Then I thought how kind it was that they had gone to all that trouble, and I forgave them for messing up my kitchen and meddling with my recipes—or maybe they had just used a mix. Anyway, I felt I had to show my appreciation, and it certainly wouldn't kill me to eat some of their cake.

They watched me with such pride and delight as I ate the cake that I took a second piece. When I had finished they said it would be best for me to rest, and I asked them to take the cake and eat what they wanted, then wrap it in foil.

And now the whole house is quiet.

I never felt better in my life. I'm smiling a great big contented smile. It must look exactly like that last sweet smile on all my husbands' faces—except Luther who was run over by a beer truck.

I feel wonderful and so relaxed.

But I can hardly hold this pencil.

Goodness, it's

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SPOT THE STORY; or, NAME THE NOVEL

by VERONICA M. S. KENNEDY

Readers are invited to identify famous mystery novels, here presented under punning or paraphrased pseudo-titles. For examples: *Dark Dollars* would be Ross Macdonald's *Black Money;* and more complexly, *Murder on a Farout Trip* would be Ngaio Marsh's *Death in Ecstasy.*

1. *Final Trunk from a Church Council*
2. *The Case of the Calamitous Candy*
3. *The Ebony Dromedary*
4. *The Unseasoned Shawl*
5. *Dame in the Duckpond*
6. *The Frolicsome Footpad*
7. *Catastrophic Conifer*
8. *The Snow Maiden*
9. *Submarine Equine*
10. *Typographers' Pet*
11. *Bird of the Islands*
12. *Evil Intended*
13. *The Mystery of the Chinese Chamber*
14. *Dwelling of the Dart*
15. *The Scarlet Mansion Mystery*
16. *The Transparent Hamlet*
17. *Missing Mannequin*
18. *The Prelate's Problem*

(Answers on page 162)

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THE CLUE OF THE RUNAWAY BLONDE

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

(continued from page 46)

QUINLAN STRAIGHTENED, holding the triangle of paper between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. The hand seemed strange to him.

Once, when he had been arresting a man charged with some minor crime, the prisoner had unexpectedly whirled and delivered a smashing punch to the side of Quinlan's head. The blow had lashed out so fast and hard that not only had Quinlan failed to see it coming, but the smashing impact had, for the moment, robbed him of all memory. And as his senses had begun to struggle for orientation, he had fancied himself in the midst of a strange world wherein surroundings that should have been familiar failed to have any significance whatever.

Now, in the same way, Quinlan's mind was reeling from the impact of his discovery. It seemed only last week that Beryl had been a baby, getting her first tooth—the worry over whooping cough—the starting of school—blossoming into a young woman—and now this.

Gradually Quinlan's mind reasserted itself. There was Martin Walworth waiting at the courthouse with the district attorney for this triangular piece of paper. Walworth would make a life-size photograph. The *Rockville Gazette* would publish it. Everyone in the community from service-station attendants on down would be looking for an automobile with this triangular gouge in the tread of the right front tire.

His first instinctive desire being to protect Beryl, Quinlan thought of changing the tire and putting on the spare. Then he took a deep breath and let his faith in his daughter assert itself. Surely Beryl could have had no part in a murder! It was simply that there were things that needed explaining, and George Quinlan, man of action, had never been one to postpone that which needed doing. Slowly he turned and walked back to the house.

Beryl was crossing the

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kitchen as the deputy opened the back door. She glanced up and smiled casually. Then she caught his eyes and stopped in her tracks.

"Where's your mother?"

"Upstairs. She's coming down now. Why, Dad?"

"Come to the front room. I want to talk with you. I don't want her to hear."

Silently Beryl followed her father into the living room. George Quinlan indicated a chair, but Beryl didn't sit down. Instead she remained standing, very trim, very erect, and very white.

"Your car," Quinlan said with a gesture of weariness. "Last night, after the murder, did you go to the Higbee place?"

For a long moment she hesitated, and in that moment Quinlan knew the most awful suspense he had ever experienced. If she should lie to him now, it would rip his soul to shreds.

"Yes," she said finally.

"Why?"

"I was . . . The sheriff telephoned. He asked me to look for you."

George Quinlan ceased to be a father. He was now only a representative of the law, his eyes keeping a steady, insistent pressure on his daughter's mind, his questions probing her thoughts. "What did the sheriff tell you?"

"Told me he'd found a cigarette case. He wanted you to take fingerprints."

"Did he ask you to look for me?"

"He asked me where you were—asked me to try and find you."

"And you went to the Higbee place?"

"Yes."

"Looking for me?"

There was a pause, a pause long enough for George Quinlan to be conscious of his perspiring hands, of the hammering of his heart, but his eyes didn't waver.

"No."

"*Why* did you go there?"

"I went . . . Oh, Dad!" Her lips quivered at the edges, and tears swam into her eyes. Then the mouth became firm. She brushed aside the tears and met her father eye to eye. "I went there because I thought it was Roy's cigarette case."

"Was it?"

"I—I thought so."

"Was it?"

"Apparently not."

"What did you do?"

"I took a chamois skin from the car and wiped every single fingerprint off of it."

"Why?"

"Because . . . because he had called me—and, well, he said it was from Fort Bixling, but I

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think now it was from San Rodolpho, and I . . . Dad, I don't know *why* I did it. Don't ask me why. I can't tell you. All I know is that I thought I had a chance to protect Roy, and all of a sudden it seemed more important to me to do that than anything else on earth. I didn't care if they killed me, I was going to protect him."

A vast weariness settled on George Quinlan. This was the end of the trail so far as he was concerned. He was discredited, finished. "You say it wasn't Roy's cigarette case after all?"

"Dad, I don't know. I can't understand it. Roy was here this morning. I asked him for a cigarette and he acted just as naturally as could be. He reached into his pocket, took out the silver cigarette case and—and afterwards, when he'd gone, I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen the engraving on it. He'd acted so completely offhand about the whole thing that it had put me off my guard. I—"

"Where's Roy now?"

"At the hotel, I guess. He wanted to clean up and get a short sleep. He wants to come out here a little later."

"Say nothing about this to him," Quinlan said. "Say nothing about it to *anyone*."

"Dad—I'm sorry."

Quinlan looked at her as though she were some stranger in the house.

"Will it make much difference?" she asked.

For twenty years George Quinlan had been trying to stand between Beryl and life, trying to protect her, to ward off the blows that Fate might deal, telling little white lies when he thought those might be necessary to reassure her. Now, looking at her, he suddenly realized that the time for this had passed. She was a woman, not a child, and she had become a woman by reason of her own act.

"Will it, Dad? Will it make much difference?"

"Yes, it will," Quinlan said and walked out, letting it go at that.

As he walked past Beryl's automobile the thought occurred to Quinlan once more to change the tire on her car. He shook it off and walked out to where he had left the car. The door swinging open was a grim reminder of the extent of the gap which existed between his life of only a few minutes ago and the maelstrom of events into which he had been swept.

"George, oh, George!"

His wife was calling from the upstairs window.

Quinlan turned. "Yes, dear?"

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"You'll be home for dinner tonight?"

It needed only that homely touch to bring him back to realities. His answer was mechanical. "I don't know, dear—yet. I'll telephone."

"Okay, let me know," she called cheerily.

Quinlan got in the car. A new worry had entered his mind, the thought of what this would mean to Martha. A man might have enough resilience and dogged determination to slug his way through to a comeback, but Martha couldn't take it. As the wife of the deputy she enjoyed a certain position in the social life of the community. People liked her for herself, but in addition there was the recognition of the importance of her husband's position.

Quinlan carefully placed the damning triangle of paper in between the leaves of his notebook. It would hold flat there. It—

It was at that moment a thought struck him.

Changing the tire on Beryl's automobile might or might not stave off discovery, but there was one absolutely certain way by which George Quinlan could give his daughter complete immunity.

Hardly realizing the full significance of what he was doing, Quinlan tore another sheet of paper from the notebook. Seemingly without orders from Quinlan's mind, but working mechanically his fingers shaped a new triangle, a triangle not quite so broad at the base and a little more pointed. He had only to walk into the district attorney's office, hand that new triangle to Martin Walworth and walk out—and Beryl's connection with the murder at the Higbee homestead need never be known.

He started the car and drove directly to the courthouse.

The district attorney's secretary was at her desk. "You may go in. They are expecting you," she said.

Quinlan entered the private office. Martin Walworth had moved over to occupy the district attorney's swivel chair. Edward Lyons, publisher of the *Rockville Gazette*, was seated at the other side of the desk, his pencil sprawling extensive notes on folded newsprint that Quinlan could read over Lyons' shoulder.

Printed on top of one of the sheets, apparently to be used as a headline, were the words: SHERIFF'S SLIPSHOD METHODS MAY RESULT IN MURDERER'S ESCAPE, DECLARES CRIMINOLOGIST.

Rush Medford, his face

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suffused with smiles, was standing behind Walworth, and Bertram Glasco, puffing contentedly on a cigar, was nodding his head as though not only agreeing with something the criminologist had said, but also signifying his continuing agreement with anything the man might be going to say.

John Farnham, sitting erect in a chair to the right of the criminologist, was watching Walworth with fixed intensity. Leave it to Farnham not to approve entirely of anything or anyone, Quinlan thought. Farnham was a typical dour-faced crusader who would never be happy, never satisfied. A one-time cowboy, he still did a little horse trading in addition to his real-estate business, and Quinlan couldn't help thinking that while he was sanctimoniously honest in his real-estate transactions, his reputation as a horse trader was such that the initiated seldom dealt with him. There had been a bay saddle horse that Farnham had sold Beckett a couple of months ago. Quinlan had seen it in the Higbee place. Farnham had said the horse was twelve, but Quinlan would bet a month's salary it was at least—

"Do you have that piece of paper, George?" Medford asked.

Quinlan opened the notebook. There was, he noticed, just the slightest tremor as his fingers took out the triangular piece of paper which he handed to the district attorney, who in turn passed it across to Walworth.

"That the triangle?" Walworth asked Quinlan, and it seemed to Quinlan that the man's eyes were unnecessarily intense in their boring scrutiny.

Quinlan nodded.

Walworth picked up the piece of paper. He turned it over to look at the other side and then said to Lyons, "Now, this is an excellent example of what I've been talking about. This piece of paper represents the outline of a piece of rubber that has been gouged out of a tire. There are no identification marks on the paper—none whatever. In the first place, the tire pattern should have been preserved with a plaster mold. But unsatisfactory as this paper method is, it's rendered doubly so by the fact that there are no identifying marks on it.

"That triangle of paper should have been initialed by the sheriff and the deputy right on the ground so that there wouldn't have been any possible chance of a mistake or—or of substitution. As it is, it's quite possible the defense attorney will rip the case wide open by claiming that anyone

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could have substituted another piece of paper in place of the original, and that this piece is one that *was* substituted."

Glasco said hastily, "That's all right, Walworth. The sheriff is slipping, but Quinlan here is all right. He's going to be the next sheriff. We don't want to have any criticism of him. Ain't that right, Ed?"

Edward Lyons, scribbling rapidly with his pencil, nodded emphatically.

Walworth almost contemptuously jerked Rush Medford's desk pen out of its well, handed it to Quinlan, and said, "Write your name or initials on the back of this piece of paper so you can identify it in court."

Quinlan leaned over the desk. The tension of his nerves was such that the initials which came jerking from the point of the pen was an angular travesty of his usual handwriting.

"Now then," Walworth said, "we'll print thousands of perfect facsimiles of this slip of paper and put a copy in the hands of every service station in the County. The original, Mr. Medford, will be carefully preserved where it can't be tampered with."

Quinlan said, "You won't want me any more?"

"Better stick around, George," Glasco told him amiably. "This is really good. Mr. Walworth is analyzing the crime, pointing out just where Bill slipped up on—"

"I've got to see a man," Quinlan apologized. "I'd like to stay, but this visit I've got to make is important."

"Go ahead," Medford said somewhat impatiently. "But just don't talk to anybody about the case, and—don't say anything about this."

Quinlan paused only briefly at the desk of the Palace Hotel. "You have a Roy Jasper here," he said. "What room's he in?"

"Two-o-five. But he's out. He checked in, cleaned up, and went right out again."

"You knew him?" Quinlan asked.

"Sure. Talked with him. He'd been up all night, needed a bath and a shave. Said he tried to sleep for a couple of hours, but he couldn't make it—had too much on his mind."

Quinlan phoned his house from the lobby. "Beryl," he said when she answered the telephone, "I want to get in touch with Roy."

"Yes, Dad, I know."

"He isn't there?"

"No, Dad."

"If you hear from him, find out where he is and let me know. If he comes there, get a call through to me right away."

Beryl said with dignity, "If

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he telephones or if I see him, Dad, I'll tell him that you want to get in touch with him right away, and for him to call you."

"That isn't what I said," Quinlan said angrily.

"Father, you *can't* doubt Roy. You simply can't do it. If I tell him to call you, I know he will."

There was something in his daughter's voice that left Quinlan feeling strangely helpless. He just didn't know how to cope with this grownup daughter, and he couldn't bring himself to threaten her as he would have threatened any other recalcitrant citizen.

He heard Beryl hang up at the other end of the line, and he slowly dropped his own receiver into place.

The *Rockville Gazette* created a sensation when it hit the streets at five o'clock that evening. Headlines screamed across the top of the page: CONSULTING CRIMINOLOGIST CALLED IN BY DISTRICT ATTORNEY MEDFORD TO SOLVE BAFFLING CASE.

Quinlan noticed that Lyons had toned down his headlines on the interview he had had with Walworth so that they now read: SLIPSHOD METHODS OF LAW-ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS GIVE CRIMINALS GREATEST BREAK, SAYS WALWORTH.

Over on the left was a silhouette, a photograph in actual size of the torn triangular piece of paper that Quinlan had given to Walworth. Accompanying the photograph in bold letters was the caption: CAN THIS BE CUT IN TIRE OF KILLER'S CAR? A boxed-in notice in bold-faced type suggested that each reader of the paper cut out this triangle and watch for a car whose right front tire had a gouged-out place in the tread corresponding with the shape of this piece of paper.

Quinlan glanced through the paper; the vague accusation of the article, the unfair tone of the entire account of the crime itself, only added to his worries.

For the fifth time in an hour he called his house.

The promptness with which Beryl answered the phone showed that she was once more sitting by the telephone, waiting.

"Anything from Roy?" the deputy asked.

"No, Dad."

"Let me know if he calls."

"I'll tell him you want to hear from him," she said.

Quinlan hung up. That interchange of comments between father and daughter had not varied substantially since he

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had begun calling her at frequent intervals asking for a report.

Sheriff Bill Eldon opened the door to find Quinlan nervously pacing the office, chewing a cigar to shreds.

"Hello, George. Anything new at this end?"

"You've seen the paper."

The sheriff nodded. "Sort of a smear, isn't it?"

"They're really going to town."

"You met Walworth?"

"Yes."

"What sort?"

"I imagine he's very able."

"Cordial?"

Quinlan glanced in the direction of the paper.

The sheriff smiled. "To you, I mean."

Quinlan paced the floor for a few turns, then abruptly whirled to face the sheriff. "Bill," he said, "I've got to tell you something."

"Take it easy," Eldon said.

"Bill, I've put you in a spot. I want to—"

"Nothing to apologize for."

"But I want to tell you about this."

"Won't it keep?"

"No."

"We've got that murder case to work on now, George."

"Well, this is—this has something to do with it, only it's personal."

"If it's personal it'll keep."

Quinlan frowned in exasperation.

"I've got some information," the sheriff went on, talking quickly, his characteristic drawl scarcely noticeable now. "Found out quite a bit about the girl. Got her located and identified. She's an Elizabeth Dow from San Rodolpho, working as cashier in a cafeteria there, and her mother was Elvira Dow. That name mean anything to you, George?"

Quinlan shook his head.

"Didn't to me, either," the sheriff said, "until I got to thinking. Seems to me I remember that name of Dow. It's not a common name. Thought I'd come back to the office and dig through the files of the local papers. You take the *Register*, George, and I'll take the *Gazette*, and we'll see what we can find. Look through the personal-mention columns—just sort of give them a once-over."

"That'll be almost an endless job," Quinlan protested.

"Oh, it won't take us over two or three hours."

"Two or three hours!" Quinlan stormed. "Here you have a red-hot murder case on your hands, with the district attorney bringing in a consulting criminologist, the cards all stacked against you, the *Ga-*

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zette just fairly itching to lift your political scalp, and you talk about looking through the personal columns for two or three hours. Good heavens, man, if it's *that* important why don't you hire some girl to run through them instead of wasting your time?"

"Take it easy, George. Take it easy!" the sheriff drawled. "You know the County doesn't give us the money to hire a girl. It expects us to—"

"Bill, there's something I want to tell you."

"Sure, sure," the sheriff said soothingly, "but let's chase down this name first. I seem to remember it, somebody outside—sort of a Red Cross business. No, that ain't it, either. It's a nurse. That's it! Say, George, ring up the hospital. Ask them if they know anything about a nurse by the name of Dow."

Quinlan reluctantly called the hospital and after a few moments relayed the information to the sheriff. "They don't know of anyone."

"Well, now," the sheriff said, "that's too bad. I had a pretty strong hunch that name of Dow was connected with a nurse. Well, I guess we've got to dig through these columns of personal mention. Don't see what else there is to be done."

"We could—"

Abruptly the door opened. A delegation came trooping into the office, Rush Medford in the lead, Martin Walworth, the criminologist, following behind, then John Farnham, his face a mask of austere self-righteousness, with Bertram Glasco bringing up the rear.

"Sheriff," the district attorney said, "I want you to meet Martin Walworth," and then he added reproachfully, "We've been trying to get in touch with you all afternoon."

"I was out of town," the sheriff said to the district attorney, and put out his hand to the criminologist. "How de do, how are you?"

Walworth's handshake was perfunctory.

The district attorney, in the voice of a lawyer making a prepared speech, said, "Sheriff, this murder at the Higbee place is an important case. This County can't afford to let the murderer get away by slipshod methods. At the behest of influential citizens my office has, therefore, called in Martin Walworth, the famous consulting criminologist."

The sheriff said, "Fine. Who's he consulting with?"

Medford flushed. "That's his title. He's a consulting criminologist."

"Then he doesn't consult with anyone?"

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"He solves crimes. He advises olice officers how to catch riminals."

"That's fine, Rush. I'm lways willing to take advice om anyone—or is he supposed o give me advice?"

"He's supposed to solve the rime," Medford said.

"You mean he isn't going to ve advice? He's going to just o ahead and solve it all by mself?"

"He's working with me," edford said.

"To solve the case," Walorth announced calmly, "and think I am well on the way to lving it."

"Yes?" the sheriff asked, id then added quite casually, it down, boys."

"I take it," Walworth said, sregarding the invitation, "no tempt was ever made to trace at cigarette case which you und."

"What do you mean, to trace "

"To find out who owns it."

"Well, now, I don't know st how you'd go about —"

"Exactly," Walworth interpted. "However, a moment's ought should have convinced u that the distinctive part of at case was the engraving. It s obviously done by some veler who had sold the case. took only a few minutes to ll the local jewelers and find that none of them had done it. Then I got in touch with the Los Angeles police and asked them to cover the better-class jewelry stores and ask the engravers there. It took less than two hours for that to yield results."

"Well, now," the sheriff said, his tone indicating his pleased surprise. "What did you find out?"

"The case was sold by Weed, Sisson and Company to a young woman who paid cash for it. She's about nineteen years of age, rather tall, slender, dark hair, very dark eyes, and has an unusual speaking voice, a clear flute-like quality that is definitely noticeable. She weighs about a hundred and fifteen, and wears a pale pink tourmaline ring on the finger of her left hand."

Quinlan cleared his throat.

"Anything else?" the sheriff asked quickly.

"And we've located the car that left that track, the one that drove out of the Higbee place after *you* had gone away and left the place without any guard and without making a search to see if an automobile was parked anywhere in the field."

"Now wait a minute, son," the sheriff said. "You mean the car that drove in and then turned around and drove out?"

"I mean the car that drove

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out," Walworth said. "At least that's all we know. You saw the tracks going out, and that's all you could and did see. If there were tracks going in, the tracks made by the car going out obliterated them."

"Well, now," the sheriff said with something of a drawl, "we can talk about that later. *I* saw tracks going in and out. But you said you'd located the car."

"Well, we've located the license number of the car, and we've wired to find out the owner of the car. The report will come in here."

"Well, well, you might as well sit down, boys," the sheriff said.

They hesitated a moment; then to the tune of scraping chairs they seated themselves into an inquisitorial half circle.

"How did you locate the car?" Quinlan asked, and his voice sounded dry and husky.

"The *Gazette* hadn't been on the street more than twenty minutes," Lyons announced triumphantly, "until a service-station man rang up. He had sold gas to a car and happened to notice that there was a gouge in the right front tire. He spoke to the young woman who was driving it, a brunette about nineteen with a very sweet clear voice. She said she didn't want to do anything about it, but the owner of the service station thought he might write her a follow-up, and see if he couldn't get a repair job out of it, so he jotted down her license number. It —"

The telephone rang sharply. Walworth said, "That will be the call, I guess," and reached for the phone.

Bill Eldon's shoulder managed to get in the way. "I'm taking my phone calls," he said and scooped up the telephone. "Sheriff's office," he announced.

But the voice of Central said "I have a person-to-person call for Mr. Martin Walworth. Is he there?"

— So the sheriff surrendered the telephone with what grace he could and watched the criminologist's face as he heard the metallic sounds which emanated from the receiver.

"You're certain?" Walworth asked into the telephone, then snapped, "Spell it."

After that he hung up and turned to face the others.

"You folks know a Beryl Mc Quinlan of 1792 Walnut Drive?" he asked, his eyes, hard and accusing, boring into those of George Quinlan.

It was impossible to miss the collective gasp which emanated from the others.

Martin Walworth continued to stare at George Quinlan. "Is she a relative of *yours?*"

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John Farnham answered the question. "A daughter," he said.

The brief period of tense silence which followed that statement was again broken by the strident ringing of the telephone.

Sheriff Eldon picked up the receiver, said, "Sheriff's office, Bill Eldon speaking." Then he said, "Wait a minute . . . What's that? . . . Oh, I see . . . All right . . . Wait for about fifteen or twenty minutes, will you? Okay, goodbye."

The sheriff hung up, saying nothing to any of the others.

Walworth's manner was that of a teacher who is demonstrating some problem which to him is entirely simple, but which is puzzling a roomful of pupils. "May I ask," he inquired sarcastically, "whether this Beryl Quinlan is around nineteen, a rather tall dark girl with dark eyes and an unusually clear voice?"

He needed no answer other than the glances which the men gave each other.

"That, gentlemen," Walworth said, "probably disposes of your murder case. It will account for the B on the cigarette case."

Rush Medford took charge at that point. "I think," he announced, "that, under the circumstances, it would be better if the district attorney's office handled this by itself from this point on," and with that he strode toward the door, jerked it open, and stood to one side, waiting for the others to precede him.

They made a self-righteous little procession as they stalked through the door, but Bertram Glasco couldn't help stopping for one final dig at the discomfited deputy. "This," he said, "probably accounts for something that puzzled me in our conversation last night."

And with that he marched out into the corridor, Rush Medford closed the door with a mild slam, and Bill Eldon and George Quinlan were left alone in the sheriff's office.

"Well," Quinlan said, "I guess that does it."

"Does what?"

"Wipes me out," Quinlan said gloomily. "And I guess I've dragged you down along with me, Bill."

"What did Glasco mean when he said something about last night?" Eldon asked.

"They wanted me to run against you."

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them I wouldn't do it as long as you wanted to run."

"Then what?"

"Then they suggested that the next big case that came along I sort of keep in the

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background and let you run the thing all by yourself and see if you wouldn't bungle on fingerprints or something."

Eldon nodded. "I thought something like that might be in the wind. And that's why Rush Medford called Martin Walworth in as a special investigator."

Quinlan nodded. He felt so utterly dejected that he didn't want to talk. They'd go and get Beryl. Rush Medford would take her to his office, go through the old rigmarole of advising her she didn't need to talk, call in a court reporter to take down what she said —

The sheriff calmly lifted the telephone, dialed a number. Quinlan slumped in his chair, chin on his chest, heard the sheriff's fatherly voice say, "Hello, Beryl? That you? . . . Where's your car? . . . Go down and get in it quick and go out to the Stanwood Auto Camp, rent a cabin under your own name. Be sure you use your own name and give the correct license number of your car. Then look around. You'll find a friend of yours there. Your father and I will be out in a few minutes, but get started *now.*"

The sheriff hung up.

"You can't do that, Bill," Quinlan said.

"Why not?"

"That's compounding a felony. You know the district attorney is on his way out there to question her concerning what happened, and —"

"Well?" the sheriff asked.

"You can't advise her to avoid him."

The sheriff grinned. "I'm asking her to go where *I* can question her."

"But the district attorney wants to take a statement from her."

"And *I* want to take a statement from her. Rush Medford wants to solve this murder case, and *I* want to solve it. Buck up, George. We're going places. Know who telephoned just a minute ago?"

"No," Quinlan said.

"Roy Jasper. He's out at the Stanwood camp. I told him to wait there."

"I don't see where we can do any good," Quinlan said.

Bill Eldon put a sympathetic hand on the deputy's shoulder. "Now, don't get down in the dumps, George. You can't blame Beryl for what she did. My gosh! I didn't even bother to stop her."

"You didn't bother to do *what?*" Quinlan exclaimed.

"To stop her."

"You mean you *knew* —"

"Of course I did," the sheriff said. "I picked up that cigarette case and recognized it right away."

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"You recognized it? How?"

The sheriff said, "On your mantelpiece there's a picture of Roy Jasper. He's in uniform, and if you'll remember he's holding this cigarette case out in front of him half open just as though he was offering someone a cigarette. You can see the engraving on the side clearly."

"Why, yes," Quinlan said. "I do remember now. How did you happen to notice that?"

"Oh, I just notice lots of things," the sheriff said. "It's a habit a man gets when he's been fooling around with crime as long as I have. You see, George, I never had a chance to study up on all this fingerprint business, and things of that sort, and because I don't do so good on those things I have to keep up on other stuff. I always felt that you have to know and understand people in order to make a good officer. It's easier for me to understand people than it is to understand all this scientific stuff about whorls and loops. Now, Beryl isn't going to be mixed up in any murder, and you know it."

"She's mixed up in one now," Quinlan said dejectedly.

Bill Eldon shook his head. "I thought that was Roy's cigarette case," he said, "so I went to a phone and instead of telephoning the coroner's office or the *Gazette* and locating you myself, I phoned Beryl and told her about wanting to get hold of you, and about my finding this cigarette case down there, and that I wanted you to fingerprint it. So then I went back where I could watch, and waited to see what happened."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I wanted to see whether Beryl knew where the cigarette case was. I was very careful to tell her that I found it in the Higbee place and describe it to her, but I didn't tell her *where* in the Higbee place I'd found it."

"And what did she do?"

"Did just what I thought she'd do," the sheriff said. "Drove down there."

"You didn't stop her?"

"No. I saw Beryl drive down, stop her car, open the gate, get in, drive up to the Higbee place, and then she had to do quite a bit of looking around before she found what she wanted.

"Then I watched her drive out and close the gate behind her. I really thought she'd taken the cigarette case with her, but she was too smart for that. She'd just wiped the fingerprints off it and left it."

"She had no right to do that," Quinlan said.

"She didn't, for a fact," the sheriff admitted cheerfully, "but I thought it was best to let her play it that way."

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"Why?"

"Because then she'd go to Roy Jasper and get him to tell her just exactly what had happened, and he'd tell *her* where he would't tell either you or me. All I had to be certain of was that Beryl hadn't been in the house when the cigarette case had been dropped. She proved that to me when she had to fumble around looking for it. If she'd gone right to the kitchen where the cigarette case had been left, I'd have had to stop her when she drove out and ask her questions. I'd have hated to do it, too, because Beryl's a nice girl."

Quinlan was having difficulty in adjusting himself to these new developments. "Then you knew before I got there what car it was that had the triangular piece out of the right front tire?"

"Sure."

"Then why did you have me go through all that business of tearing out a piece of paper?"

"Well, George," the sheriff said, "I sort of wanted to see what *you'd* do. That's why I gave *you* that triangular piece of paper to keep. I thought perhaps —"

"Don't think for a minute I wasn't tempted," Quinlan interrupted bitterly. "I even went so far as to tear out a substitute piece of paper. But when it came to a showdown I couldn't use it."

"I know," the sheriff said soothingly. "Well, let's go out to the auto camp and see what's up. I'll call my house first."

Sheriff Eldon called his house. Then, when the answer came, his face winced with displeasure. "Hello, Doris," he said. "Where's Merna? Is she there? . . . I see. Well, take a message for her, will you? Tell her that I want her to start looking through the personal mentions in the back issues of the papers beginning about six or seven months ago and see if she can find some mention of an Elvira Dow. I think she —"

The sheriff was interrupted by a burst of high-pitched staccato noises which came rattling over the wire.

Slowly the look of annoyance on his face faded to a whimsical smile. "All right, Doris," he said, "I guess it's a good thing to have a gossip in the family after all."

He hung up and grinned at Quinlan. "Looks as though we're getting somewhere, George. That was the old Human Encyclopedia, my sister-in-law, who sticks that long nose of hers into more different business of more different people than you'd ever suspect. She was visiting here when old Higbee died, and she eagerly

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devoured all the scandal about his common-law marriage to his housekeeper, and all the stink that was raised. Elvira Dow was the nurse who lived at the house for about ten days after Marvin Higbee had his stroke. She was with him up until the time of his death."

"Then this girl who was murdered was —"

"Elvira Dow's daughter. Put that together with the fact that people were zigzagging back and forth around the house looking for something, and we begin to get an answer. We —"

The telephone rang again. Eldon answered, listened to a rasping voice, and said, "So what?" After an interval he slammed the receiver back.

Quinlan looked at him questioningly.

"Rush Medford," the sheriff said. "He's down at your place. Your wife told him Beryl got a call a few minutes ago and then jumped in her jalopy and went tearing out."

Quinlan groaned. "And I suppose he suspects me!"

Eldon grinned. "Come on, son. Kinda looks as though we gotta move fast."

(continued on page 131)

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TESTIMONY OF A WITNESS

by McGARRY MORLEY

"I NEVER USED TO HAVE any trouble getting to sleep, but lots of nights I just pitch and toss. It was always worse after I'd gone to see Bessie. I tried to get out to the asylum at least once a month, even though she hadn't changed any and still acted like she was walking in her sleep—not seeing or hearing anything and never saying a word. I guess I was the only one that kept on going because everyone else said she wouldn't know them and it would be a wasted trip. The only thing they were ever interested in was, had she said anything about exactly what had happened because that was still a mystery.

"Wasted trip or not I still went, maybe as much for Ben as for Bessie. After all, we had been friends for a long time, clear back to when we were in grammar school together and Bessie was just a little red-headed freckled thing no bigger than a pint of soft soap. We didn't call her Bessie then—it was always Bossie because she was such a hand to take charge.

"If it was a picnic Bessie would be saying, 'Gert, you bring the potato salad,' and 'Floss, you can make the deviled eggs,' and like that. Or if it was some kind of meeting she would be standing up all the time telling what they ought to do and usually she'd end up being president or chairman or whatever.

"Ben was always an agreeable fellow and if someone said, 'Let's go fishing,' he'd go. Or if they said, 'Let's play ball,' why, that was all right, too. He used to just grin when Bessie was ordering everyone around, so I guess he liked her even then.

"In high school they went together, and sometimes folks would tease him and say, 'Watch out, Ben, those redheads are hard to break and she may throw and drag you'; but he wasn't bothered any and after they got out of school they got married and moved to a farm that Ben bought.

"Ben was a good farmer and did all right. After he'd been on the place about seven years and had it all paid for, he figured he could afford some help. So he came to me and said, 'I need a hired hand. How about it?'

"Well, I had just been

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 351st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. . .

We have some interesting things to tell you about the author, McGarry Morley. He was graduated from Wisconsin University as an electrical engineer, got a job with Westinghouse, was assigned to the advertising department; later he went to work for an advertising agency. In his spare time he wrote humorous nonfiction pieces and sold some of them to "The Saturday Evening Post," "Life," and "Judge." Recently he has written some nonfiction reminiscences about his family, especially about his grandfather in a rural area called Brush Hollow.

Mr. Morley now lives on a couple of acres about twenty miles north of Pittsburgh. He has a garden—or, as he puts it, "the rabbits, raccoons, woodchucks, pheasants and I have a garden; precise title seems to be in question." And he has a shop in his basement where he does some woodworking.

But all these are prosaic details. We haven't told you the most interesting thing about Mr. Morley. At the time of this writing, at the time we purchased his "first story," McGarry Morley was 75 years old. Imagine, a beginning writer of fiction at the age of 75! It is the most encouraging thing that has happened to our Department of First Stories since—well, since we published "first stories" by teen-agers! And what a realistic, economical, impressive "first story" Mr. Morley gives us at the start of his new career!. . .

working around for this farmer and that one, or on a road crew or maybe in the tobacco warehouse during the winter, so I said, 'Sure,' and moved in.

"It had been a considerable time since I'd been with them much and I could see a change. I guess the ones that had said Bessie would be hard to break were right. She didn't interfere with Ben's farming none, but inside the house she certainly ran things. 'Don't go in the Room with your shoes on,' she'd say—the Room was what

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she called the parlor—'You'll track it up.' Or if he tried to chop some kindling for the range she'd say, 'Here, give me that hatchet and let me do it. You'll litter up the whole place.'

"It was when she was cooking, though, that she was real bossy. If she made pancakes they had to be turned only once. If anyone was helping and turned them again, even while putting them on the plate, she'd say, 'They aren't fit for the dog now.' The potatoes had to be put on the stove in cold water and when a hired girl she had for a short while took some water out of the reservoir to start the potatoes, danged if Bessie didn't grab the pot and throw the potatoes right out.

"She was fussier about the coffee than any other thing. There had to be a heaping tablespoonful for each cup and one for the pot and there had to be eggshells put in to clear it up. Then the pot had to be snatched off the range the very instant the coffee hit the boil.

"Well, I got to admit that she made wonderful coffee that came out of the pot as clear as spring water and you would always want another cup. Ben sat with his back to the stove and he'd reach back and grab the pot and shake it as though he was trying to see if there was any left.

"Then Bessie'd pop out of her chair like a quail taking off and scream, 'Don't shake that pot—you'll ruin my good coffee!' And Ben would look kind of surprised as though he couldn't imagine what was bothering her. This happened time and again, and I could never figure out if he did it just to devil her, or to show her and maybe himself that he was not a doormat in everything. Anyway, he did it every chance he got, and it seemed to make Bessie's voice louder and shriller every time it happened.

"I worked there just over three years and Bessie got more and more fussy, but I didn't complain because she was a wonderful cook and they both treated me fine. A few times I caught myself just in time when I was about to use her old nickname. Lucky for me, because I think if I had ever called her Bossy she'd have grabbed a skillet and run me off the place.

"Along about late in October my Uncle Warren died and as the work was well caught up I went over to Maple Grove for the funeral. I came back on the Monday morning train and looked around for a ride out to Ben's place and just by luck the Sheriff was going out that way. He had a new rifle he wanted to get sighted in before deer

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season and there was a place near Ben's where he had a hundred yards clear and a bank for a backstop. Of course the old cuss already had the gun sighted in good enough for the average hunter, but he had to be able to drive tacks with his rifle.

"He drove into Ben's door-yard and just then we heard a noise from the other side of the house and some fellow took off across a plowed field towards the woods. We wondered what on earth and jumped out of the car and went to the door of the kitchen. The Sheriff took one quick look, grabbed his gun out of the car, and shouted at the fellow running to halt. He didn't and the Sheriff yelled again, 'Halt or I'll fire!' and drew on the man. He must have been two hundred yards away by then and almost to the woods, but when the Sheriff pulled the trigger, down he went.

"I walked into the kitchen but I sure wished I hadn't. Bessie was lying on her back on the floor, all covered with blood. Ben was lying half on top of her. He had the little hatchet from the woodbox that they used to split kindling and it was buried right in his head. The table was overturned and the dishes and the coffee pot were all over the floor. The door on the other side of the kitchen that led to the little porch in the back was open and that was lucky because I just made it through before I was sick.

"The Sheriff came back and said the fellow that tried to run away would keep. He had got him in the middle of the back and out through the chest, which was darn fine shooting in any man's language, but the Sheriff wasn't satisfied.

" 'Bad shot,' he said, shaking his head. 'Aimed to get him in the leg, but the gun shot high. Not sighted in right. Besides, he stumbled and maybe dropped down a bit just when I fired.' It must be tough to have to do everything so perfect.

"I wouldn't go back in but the Sheriff did and called Doc Blake. He came out and they took Bessie to the hospital and Ben and the fellow the Sheriff had shot to the undertaker. He was just a young fellow.

"On Thursday Old Baldy Briggs, the Justice of the Peace, held the Coroner's inquest. So many people came they had to move to the Court House to find room. Old Baldy spread himself, of course, and acted like he was a Circuit Court Judge.

"They had rounded up some people who had seen the young fellow. Aunt Martha Morse said

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he'd come to her house Sunday and asked if he could do some work for something to eat. He split some wood for her and she gave him a good dinner.

" 'Did you feel uneasy about this man?' Old Baldy says.

" 'Land, no,' Aunt Martha said. 'He was as nice a young fellow as you would want to see. I wasn't a bit worried about him.'

"Then they got Granny Gower and she testified the young fellow had been to her house Sunday evening and asked for something to eat. She claimed she distrusted him from the start and that she was not at all surprised to hear he was a murderer. Of course that just goes to show you about people.

"The Sheriff then told about shooting the fellow to stop him from running away. He said they'd sent his fingerprints away, and his prints had not been on file, so apparently the fellow wasn't a regular criminal. Then they got Doc Blake on the stand. He could just about squeeze into the witness chair and he didn't look natural without his little black bag.

"He said Ben had died from a hatchet blow to the brain, which wasn't exactly news. Bessie he couldn't be sure of, because she had a concussion and hadn't come out of it yet. He couldn't tell if she'd been struck on the head, thrown down by the young fellow who was maybe trying to assault her, or knocked down by Ben when he fell on her—maybe when she had tried to help Ben during the attack.

"The Coroner asked him if Bessie would be able to testify soon, to get the actual story.

"Doc looked kind of bothered. 'I just can't say,' he told Old Baldy. 'The bump she got doesn't look too bad, but there must have been some brain damage because she acts like she's in a coma. Of course part of this might be due to shock. All I can say is, I guess we'll just have to wait and see.'

"Well, the Coroner's Jury talked it over and they decided that the murderer must have been the young fellow, name unknown. Then they adjourned, postponing the final verdict till Bessie could talk.

"The only thing was, Bessie didn't get able to talk. She came to, but her eyes looked stary like she didn't know what was happening and she didn't say a word. They sent her to the State Asylum for treatment, but she was back in a couple of months. They hadn't been able to do anything for her. The doctors there thought the trouble was what they called psychic shock, from seeing her husband killed.

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"The only other place they had to send her was to the County Asylum, where they put her in the kitchen. The cook said she was the best helper she'd ever had and she only wished she could find some sane people that were as steady and hardworking. I'd gone out this day in February, and as usual Bessie didn't show any signs of knowing me, or even seeing me. She didn't even answer when I said hello. It was a real cold day and a fellow named Joe Weber who had just started to work there as an attendant and guard came into the kitchen from outside. He went up to the range to soak in some heat and then he saw the coffee pot on the stove and knew it was just what he needed to thaw out. He picked it up and shook it to see if there was any coffee left in it.

"That was when Bessie said her first words since Ben was killed. 'No, no,' she said. 'No, no.' It wasn't just an ordinary 'No.' It was like someone might say who's just heard some bad news he didn't want to believe.

"Joe said, 'It's all right—there's plenty of coffee here,' and shook the pot again.

"Then Bessie said, 'You are just like my husband. He wouldn't listen either, when I told him.'

"Then she shoved the cook, who was cutting up meat for supper, away from the block and grabbed the cleaver and sunk it four inches deep into Joe's skull.

"Now when I can't sleep nights, thinking about Ben and Bessie, I think about that young fellow the Sheriff shot. He must've just stopped to ask for some breakfast and saw what was on the kitchen floor and then heard us and got so scared he'd be blamed that he turned and ran. I lie here and wonder if somewhere somebody is lying awake like I am, and wondering when that young fellow is coming home."

"Q"

NEXT MONTH ...

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THE PEACEFUL PEOPLE

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"WE CALL OURSELVES," said Lord Axminster, "The Peaceful People, and we are gathered here tonight to testify by our presence, our belief in the rightness, the cumulative force and the inevitable ultimate success of the cause we all have at heart, the great cause of World Peace. It *must* prevail. There will be setbacks. No cause worthy of the name has ever succeeded without encountering, and overcoming, the opposition of bigotry, self-interest, and indifference. These are dragons to be slain and we will slay them, not grudging the mortification and the wounds, the toil and the discomfort—"

The chair on which he was seated had, Mr. Behrens concluded, been designed by a

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sadist. Its seat was not only hard, but knobbly in all the wrong places. It was tilted at an angle which threw you forward, but it was so short it gave no real support to the thighs.

"—but I will detain you no longer with blasts from my feeble trumpet. The object of our gathering is an exchange of ideas. A cross-fertilization of mind with mind. After we have heard the report of our International Secretary, Reverend Bligh, of the Unitarian Church of Minnesota, and have considered the financial statement produced by our hard-working treasurer, Mr. Ferris, we will be pleased to deal with the many questions which must, I feel sure, be agitating your minds."

Reverend Bligh plunged straight into business. "Support for our movement," he said, "continues to be global. In the period since we last met, messages of encouragement, and donations, have been received from Anatolia, Algeria, the Andaman Islands, Bahrain, Bangkok, Barbados—"

The raised edge of the seat dug into the femoral artery, cutting off the blood supply, and causing Mr. Behrens agonizing pins and needles.

"—Venezuela, Western Germany, Yucatan, and Zanzibar. In the light of such universal support we should be wrong to consider ourselves as lonely fighters. We must feel ourselves to be, as it were, the advance guard of a great invisible army with banners, marching as to war." Feeling, perhaps, that this was an unhappy metaphor, he added, "A war for peace," and sat down; whereupon Mr. Ferris, armed with a bundle of documents, reeled off a quantity of figures. The young man in horn-rimmed spectacles on Mr. Behrens' left woke up and started to make notes. Pins and needles were succeeded by complete paralysis of the lower leg.

Question time was kicked off with an inquiry from a lady who had a nephew in Tanzania; it touched on devaluation (dealt with by Mr. Ferris), the role of the Church (a "natural" for Bishop Bligh), and the iniquities of the Government (blocked by Lord Axminster, whose peerage was political). It did not take them long to reach Vietnam.

A tall man, with insecure false teeth, managed to ask, "Would the platform expound to us its proposals with regard to the unhappy conflict at present decimating the peaceful people of Vietnam?"

"Certainly," said Lord Axminster. "Our proposal is that the fighting cease at once."

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"On a more concrete plane," said the young man with horn-rimmed spectacles, "how is it proposed that this solution with which we all, of course, agree, should actually be attained?"

"It will be attained automatically, and immediately, when the United States withdraws its armed forces from the country."

When the applause had subsided, Mr. Behrens rose to his feet and said, "Would it be proposed that the South Vietnamese forces should also withdraw from the country?"

"Certainly not," said Lord Axminster. "The Vietnamese of the South would lay down their arms and embrace their brothers from the North in fraternal friendship."

Renewed applause.

When the meeting was finished, Mr. Behrens got out as fast as the state of his legs would allow.

He had spotted a familiar-shaped head of gray hair in the front row. When its owner emerged into the foyer, Mr. Behrens had his back turned and was examining one of the campaign posters. He allowed the gray-headed, red-faced figure to get ahead of him, then followed. A taxi cruised past. The man ignored it and strode on. Evidently he had a car parked nearby somewhere.

Mr. Behrens secured the taxi. He said to the driver, "If I was leaving here by car for the West End, which way would I have to go?"

The driver meditated. He said, "You're bound to go over the railway bridge. Carnelpit. All one way, see."

"Excellent," said Mr. Behrens. "Get to the railway bridge and stop there."

"Want me to follow someone?"

"That's the idea."

"Police?"

"Special Constable."

"You look a bit old for a policeman."

"They're so short of men these days," said Mr. Behrens sadly. "They have to call up anyone they can get hold of."

It was an interesting chase. The gray-haired man was a bad-tempered driver and took a lot of chances with traffic lights and other motorists, but the taxi driver stuck to him with the ease of an expert angler playing a fresh-water fish. They finished up, fifty yards apart, outside a house in Eaton Terrace. Mr. Behrens noted the number and signaled the taxi driver to keep going. Once they were round the corner he redirected him to the Dons-in-London Club. He had a long report to write.

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Two hundred miles to the North, in the industrial outskirts of a Midland town, a different sort of meeting was taking place. A couple of hundred men, mostly in overalls or old working clothes, were crowded into the small open space in front of the main gates of the Amalgamated Motor Traction Company's factory. Since it was the lunch hour many of them were eating sandwiches, out of small dispatch cases, but all were listening to the speaker.

"Punchy" Lewis had a jerky but forceful delivery. He had learned the value of short simple sentences, and his timing was expert. Lord Axminster could have learned a lot from him.

"And who gains from this lovely arrangement? Who actually gains from it? I'll tell you one thing. *We* don't. And if *we* don't, who does? You don't need to be a genius at mathematics to work that out. Who gains?"

"*They* do," shouted the crowd.

Mr. Lewis smiled down on his listeners. "You heard what they call it! They call it a new deal. That's not what I call it. I call it a crooked deal. A deal with a stacked deck. And shall I tell you who's champion at stacking cards?" Pause for effect. "The bloody Yanks, that's who."

There was a roar from the crowd.

Mr. Calder who was standing inconspicuously in the rear found it difficult to tell whether the applause was a tribute to the speaker's timing, or whether there was genuine warmth in it.

"That's what I said. The bloody Yanks." Lewis turned his head toward the building behind him and shouted, "And I hope you heard *that* in the Board Room." Swinging round on the meeting and lowering his voice to a conversational level he added, "What we've had plenty of since these bloody Yanks took over is Amalgamated Motors is trouble. A big handout of trouble. Now they want us to crawl in and lick their boots and say thank you for a lovely new deal. If *you* want to do that, *I* don't."

Mr. Calder became aware of movement behind him. The workers who wanted to get back, because the lunch break was over, were forming up in some sort of order at the rear of the crowd, which blocked the way. Lewis saw them too.

"I notice some of our mates," he said, "hanging round the back there, waiting to crawl in. That's why we're holding our meeting right here. Because

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if they want to crawl in they'll have to crawl past us, and we can just see them do it."

There were police there too, Mr. Calder noticed, in plain clothes as well as in uniform. Leading them was a Superintendent, with the beefy red face and light blue eyes of a fighter. He pushed his way through the crowd and made straight for Lewis.

He said, "Stand back. Clear the way there. If these men want to get in you've got no right to stop them."

Over the growing crowd noises Lewis could be heard shouting, "We've got our rights under the law! We're picketing this gate. Peaceful picketing."

The Superintendent said, "Take that man."

And then pandemonium broke loose.

Mr. Calder had every intention of keeping out of trouble. He started to back away. As he did so, someone tripped him from behind. He put his hands out to save himself and received a violent blow in the middle of the back. Until that moment he had assumed that the hustling was accidental. Now he knew better. Instead of trying to turn he let himself go, falling across the trampling legs. Two men tripped over him, and he pulled a third man's legs from under him, squirmed onto his hands and knees, and crawled to temporary safety behind the human barricade he had created.

As he scrambled to his feet he could hear the police whistles shrilling for reinforcements. A crash proclaimed that the platform had gone down. Mr. Calder waited no longer. He ran toward the side road, where he had left his car.

When he got there, he saw there was going to be more trouble. A truck was now parked across the nose of his car, and two men were sitting in it, watching him.

He said, "Would you mind moving that truck? I want to get out."

The men looked at each other, then climbed slowly out, one on each side of the cab. They were big men. One of them said, "What's the hurry, mate? You running away or something?" The other laughed and said, "Looks as if someone's been roughing him up already."

"That's right. And if he doesn't mind his manners he may be in for more."

Mr. Calder said, "I'm getting tired of this." He opened the door of his car. Rasselas came out and looked at the men, lifting his lip a little as he did so. Mr. Calder indicated the man on the right, and the dog

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moved toward him, his yellow eyes alight. The man stepped back quickly. As he did so, Mr. Calder hit the second man.

It was not a friendly blow. It was a left-handed short-arm jab, aimed low enough to have got him disqualified in any prize fighting ring. As the man started to double up, Mr. Calder slashed him across the neck with the full swing of his right arm, hand held rigid. The man went down and stayed down. Mr. Calder then transferred his attention to the other man, who was standing quite still, his back against the truck, watching Rasselas.

"You can either move the truck," said Mr. Calder, nursing his right hand which had suffered in the impact, "or have your windpipe opened up."

"You would appear to have been in the wars," observed Mr. Fortescue. "That's a remarkably perfect example of a black eye that you have. How did you acquire it?"

Mr. Calder said, "I was trodden on. By a plainclothes policeman, actually."

"I trust you weren't attempting to assault him."

"I wasn't attempting to do anything except keep out of trouble. I was tripped from behind, hit as I went down, and trampled on."

"Accidents will happen."

"There was nothing accidental about it. I was on the edge of the crowd, minding my own business. But someone had spotted me. There were two more of the heavy brigade waiting for me by my car. Luckily I had Rasselas with me, and that evened things up."

"I see. And what was your impression of the meeting?"

"Manufactured, for public consumption. A very skilled piece of stage management by people who knew their job backwards. A couple of hundred genuine strikers, at least twenty professional agitators, and an equal number of reporters, who'd been tipped off beforehand that something was going to happen and were ready with cameras and notebooks to record it for posterity."

"It may not prove," said Mr. Fortescue, "that having reporters there was really such a good idea. The police impounded all the photographs they'd taken. I have copies here. Is there anyone you recognize?"

Mr. Calder looked at the photographs. Some of them seemed to have been taken from a window overlooking the scene and showed the whole crowd. Others were closeups, taken by reporters in the melee

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itself. There was a fine shot of the platform going down and Punchy Lewis jumping clear.

"Is that Superintendent Vellacott on the ground?"

"It is indeed. He was very roughly handled and is now in the Infirmary. He's still on the danger list."

Mr. Calder had carried one of the photographs over to the window to examine it. He said, "There are one or two faces here I seem to recognize."

"Indeed, yes. Govan, Patrick, Hall—"

"An All-Star cast. What are they doing with them?"

"They're being held. The Chief Constable would like to charge them. He's very upset about his Superintendent. I've tried to persuade him that it would be unwise. They'll make a public show out of the trial. If they're convicted they're martyrs, and if they're acquitted they're heroes."

Mr. Calder was still intent on the photographs. "That's me," he said. "You can just see my foot sticking out." He picked up another one. "What beats me is, who puts the money up for a show like this? Twenty top-class agitators at twenty-five pounds apiece. And they wouldn't get Punchy to come from South Wales for less than a hundred quid."

"Part, at least, of their funds come from a liberal and philanthropic body known as The Peaceful People. You may have seen their manifestoes in the papers."

"I have indeed. I thought they were a harmless and woolly-minded lot of intellectual pinks."

"Behrens has attended six of their public meetings in the last two months. He found them excessively boring."

"*My* meeting wasn't boring!"

"Last night he thought he recognized Sir James Docherty in the audience. He followed him home to check up. It was Sir James."

"Odd place to find our current shadow Foreign Secretary."

"Sir James is an odd man," said Mr. Fortescue.

He said the same thing to the Home Secretary that afternoon.

Mr. Fortescue had served six Home Secretaries, and the incumbent was the one he admired most—a thick Yorkshireman, sagging a little now, but still showing the muscle and guts that had brought him up from a boyhood in the pits to his present job.

He said, "If things go wrong for us at the next election, Fortescue, he'll be one of *your* new bosses. I wish you luck with him. He was here this

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morning, complaining about some customs officer who had dared to open his bag when he was coming back from one of his trips to Paris. He asked me to discipline him. I refused, of course. Don't let's talk about Sir James. I want to hear about the riot."

"Calder was in the crowd. He confirms what we'd suspected. It was a put-up job. Aimed at the American management of Amalgamated Motors."

"Motive?"

"Anti-Americanism is the easiest platform for any rabble-rouser today."

"The easiest *and* the most dangerous. An open split between ourselves and the Americans would benefit the Russians enormously. And the Chinese still more. Who were behind this show? Do we know?"

"It was paid for, if not actually run, by the Action Committee of The Peaceful People. The main body is respectable, aboveboard, and full of public figures. It holds meetings, writes to the papers, and collects funds, which it hands over to its Action Committee, without much idea, I would suspect, of how the funds are going to be used."

"The tail wagging the dog, eh. They'd want more than casual money to finance the sort of national pressure they're keeping up."

"Yes," said Mr. Fortescue. "I fancy they're getting regular subsidies."

"Where from?"

"I'd very much like to find out. But it's not going to be easy. Some organizations are easy to penetrate. But not this particular committee. It's too closely interrelated. The members all know each other personally. They've worked together for years. If we tried to slip anyone in, it would simply be asking for trouble. The sort of trouble Calder ran into at the meeting."

He told the Home Secretary about it. The Yorkshireman said, "Ay, they're a rough crowd. What do you suggest?"

"We shall have to tackle it from the outside. Slower, but more certain. The first thing is to trace the money. It comes from somewhere abroad. Regularly, and in largish amounts. The Bank of England is confident that it's not done by credit transfer. This money actually comes in—that is, it's brought in physically. If we knew how it would be a start. Either the money would lead us to the man, or the man to the money. When we've got proof we'll let The Peaceful People know exactly how they're being used. They won't like it. And

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they'll stop financing their Action Committee. Without money they can't function."

The Home Secretary had listened to this exposition in silence—a silence which continued after Mr. Fortescue had finished. At last he said, "I don't have to tell you that things are moving very fast in international politics at the moment. Personally, I'm not unhopeful. The outcome might be very good. On the other hand it might be very bad. And the smallest thing could tip the balance. So don't take too long."

The Offices of William Watson (Paris) Limited, Importers and Exporters, are in a small street running south from the Quai des Augustins. The head of the firm is a Mr. Mackenzie, but should you ask to see him you will invariably find that he is absent, on temporary sick leave. You will be invited to return in a week's time.

If you know the form you refuse to be put off and inquire instead for his deputy, Mr. Rathbone. Mr. Behrens evidently knew the form. He was shown into an outer office and passed, after scrutiny by a severe, gray-haired lady, into the inner sanctum where a surprisingly youthful Mr. Rathbone was trying his hand at a French crossword puzzle.

When the preliminaries had been concluded he said, "Your last signal stirred things up a bit, I can tell you. Do you mind explaining what's happening?"

Mr. Behrens said, "It's a long story. Four men were pulled in after a strike meeting in the Midlands. A Welshman named Lewis and three others. They had some trouble with them."

"Was that when the Superintendent got kicked?"

"That's right. Well, they found money on all of them. New notes, in sequence. And it was hot money—part of the proceeds of two bank jobs pulled by the Barrow gang last year. But—and this is the odd part—we knew for certain, because we'd had a reliable tip, that the loot had left the country. It was taken across the Channel on the night of the robbery and was out of the country before the news of the robbery broke. It was cached somewhere here, in Paris, until the heat cooled off. Then it was offered, discreetly, for sale. At a heavy discount, of course. Three months ago the Chinese bought the lot."

"So that's why you asked us to keep an eye on their Trade Commission."

"That's right. We thought it might give us a lead."

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"Well, we've got something for you. Whether it's a lead or not I don't know. You'll have to tell me."

Mr. Rathbone went across to a cabinet labeled "Export Samples," unlocked it, and extracted a folder.

"The only thing we've noticed in the least bit odd is that one of their chauffeurs has been paying regular visits, after dark, to a small place called the Hôtel Continental. It's a moderate-sized dump in the Place Languedoc. Not too expensive, much used by businessmen from England, civil servants coming to conferences, Government delegates, and people of that type. The sort of place where they serve bacon and eggs for breakfast without being asked."

"And what does the chauffeur do when he gets there?"

"He disappears into the kitchen. What happens after that we haven't been able to find out."

"Possibly he has a girl friend in the kitchen staff."

"Maybe. When he's not being a chauffeur he's a Colonel in the Chinese Army—so I think it's unlikely."

"Even Colonels have human feelings," said Mr. Behrens. "But I agree there might be something in it. Could you get a list of all the guests—particularly the English guests—who have stayed at the Continental during the past six months?"

Mr. Rathbone extracted a list from the folder and said, "Your wishes have been anticipated, sir. It goes back to the beginning of the year."

Mr. Behrens studied the list. Two names on it, which occurred no less than four times, appeared to interest him.

The prison interview room was quiet and rather cold. Punchy Lewis, in custody, looked a smaller, less magnetic figure than Punchy Lewis on a platform. His thin white face was set in obstinate lines. He said, "It's bloody nothing to do with you where I got the money from. It's not a crime in this country to own money, or have they passed some law I haven't heard about?"

"If you don't realize the spot you're in," said Mr. Calder, "it's a waste of time talking to you." He got up and made for the door. A policeman was sitting outside, his head just visible through the glass spy-hole.

"No one's persuaded me I'm in a spot," said Lewis. "I didn't do anything. If the police charge in while I'm speaking, and get roughed up, they can't blame me. I didn't incite anyone. Every word I said's on

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record. I've got nothing to be afraid of."

Mr. Calder perched on the corner of the table, like a man who is in two minds whether to go or stay. He sat there for a long minute while Lewis shifted uneasily in his chair. Then he said, "I don't like you. I don't like the people you work for. And if I didn't want something out of you personally, I wouldn't lift a finger to help you. But that's the position. You've got one piece of information I want. It's the only thing you've got for sale. And I'll buy it."

"Talk straight."

"You think you're going to be charged with incitement, or assault, or something like that. You're not. The charge is receiving stolen goods. And you'll get five or seven for it."

"The money, you mean? Talk sense, man. I didn't know it was stolen."

"That's not what the police are going to say. Do you know where that money came from? It was lifted from a bank—by the Barrow gang last year."

"And just how are they going to show I knew that?"

"Be your age. They've already got two witnesses lined up who saw Charlie Barrow handing it to you in a Soho Club."

"It's a lie."

"All right," said Mr. Calder calmly. "It's a lie. But it's what they're going to say all the same. They don't like having their chaps kicked in the head. They're funny that way."

"The bloody sods," said Lewis. He thought for a moment, then added, "They'd do it, too."

Mr. Calder got up. He said, "I haven't got a lot of time to waste. Do we deal or not?"

"What's the proposition?"

"I want to know where that money came from. Who gave it to you. When and where and how. Details that I can check up. You give me that and the charge of receiving goes out of the window."

Sir James Docherty said to his wife, "I'm afraid I'm off on my travels. It's Paris again."

"Oh, dear," said Lady Docherty. "So soon?"

"Needs must, when public duty calls. Is there any more coffee in that pot?"

"I can squeeze out another cup. Who is it this time?"

"I've got semi-official talks with de Bessières at the Quai d'Orsay. There are occasions"—Sir James dropped two lumps of sugar into his coffee—"when the French Government finds it easier to make unofficial suggestions to a member of the opposition than

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to the Government. Then they can disclaim them if things don't work out."

"I'm sure they like talking to you because they know that you'll be Foreign Minister, as soon as the electorate comes to its senses."

"Maybe," said Sir James. "I'll be taking Robin with me."

A faint shadow crossed Lady Docherty's face. "Do you think you ought to?" she said. "He's been away such a lot. Four times to France and those trips to the Midlands—"

"My dear," said Sir James, "you're talking as though they were holiday jaunts. He's not wasting his time, you know. He's studying political science. And what better way to study political science than to see politics in action. When he comes to France with me he meets important people—people who matter. He can see the wheels of international politics turning. When he goes to the Midlands it's to study these industrial strikes at first hand."

"Those terrible strikes. Why do they do it?"

"You mustn't assume," said Sir James, scooping the sugar out of the bottom of the cup with his spoon, "that the faults are all on one side. Management can be quite as bloody-minded as the workers. More so, sometimes."

In the next 48 hours a lot of apparently disconnected activities took place. Mr. Calder spent the time working as a porter in Covent Garden helping to load the trucks of an old friend of his in the fruit trade. His spare time was divided between betting shops and public houses, neither in short supply in that neighborhood. The money he made in the former he spent in the latter.

Mr. Behrens, who had reserved a room at the Hôtel Continental in the Place Languedoc, spent his time making friends with the hotel staff.

Young Robin Docherty had a prickly interview with his class tutor at the London School of Economics. The tutor said that if Robin spent all of his time running errands for his father in the Midlands and trotting across to Paris with him in the intervals, he was most unlikely to complete the scholastic side of his studies satisfactorily.

The Home Secretary answered two questions and three supplementaries about the strikes and disturbances which were paralyzing the motor industry. And Mr. Fortescue attended to the customers at the Westminster Branch of the London and Home Counties Bank, granting one overdraft and refusing two.

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Mr. Calder came to see Mr. Fortescue on the third day.

He said, "What Lewis told us has checked. I still don't know how the money gets into this country from France, but as soon as it does get here it's taken to a betting shop in Covent Garden. The Action Committee meets in the back room of a pub just down the road. It's on their instructions that the cash payments are handed out from the bookmakers. That's as much as I've been able to learn. I can't get any closer to these people. Some of them know me."

Mr. Fortescue considered the matter, rotating a silver pencil slowly over in his hand as he did so. Then he said, "If you've evidence that stolen money is passing through this betting shop there should be no difficulty about getting permission to listen in to their telephone."

"You ought to get some useful tips on the races," said Mr. Calder.

Mr. Fortescue did not smile. His eyes were on his pencil. "Some sort of arrangements must be made for the reception of the money."

"That probably takes place after the shop's shut. There's a back entrance."

"No doubt. What I mean is, they must know when to expect the money and who's going to bring it. If we could find that out, we could put our finger on the courier. Then we might be able to backtrack to the person who brings it across the Channel. We shall have to do it very carefully."

"You will indeed," said Mr. Calder. "These boys have got eyes in the back of their heads."

It was exactly a week later when Mr. Fortescue called on the Home Secretary and made his report.

"When you gave us permission to listen in to that betting shop we started to make some real progress. It was the calls after hours that interested us. They were very guarded and came through different intermediaries, but we were able to trace them to their original source."

"To the carrier of the money?"

"To his house."

"Excellent. Who is the man?"

"The owner of the house," said Mr. Fortescue with a completely impassive face, "is Sir James Docherty."

For a moment this failed to register. Then the Home Secretary swung round, his face going red. "If that's a joke—" he said.

"It's not a joke. It's a fact.

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The point of origin of these messages is Sir James's house in Eaton Terrace. Sir James also happens to be a member—a founding member—of The Peaceful People. Taken alone, I agree, neither of these facts is conclusive."

"Taken together they're still inconclusive. You told me that The Peaceful People were backing their Action Committee with money. The messages might have been about that."

"They might have been," said Mr. Fortescue, "but they weren't. They had nothing to do with the official business of the Society at all. And here are two other facts. One of my men has been making inquiries in Paris. He has established that there is a regular courier service between the Chinese Trade Commission and the Hôtel Continental. *Which happens to be Sir James's regular pied-a-terre in Paris.* Add to that the fact that Sir James's visits are usually arranged at official level. And that this enables him to bring in his valise, which is said to carry official papers, under diplomatic exemption."

The Home Secretary said, "Do you really believe, Fortescue, that a man in Sir James's position would lend himself to smuggling currency—a criminal maneuver?"

"Whether or not I believed it," said Mr. Fortescue, "would depend in the last analysis on my estimate of his character."

The Home Secretary turned this reply over in his mind for a few moments. Then he grunted and said, "He's a loud-mouthed brute, I agree. And I loathe his politics. But that doesn't make him a crook."

"I am told that he is something of a domestic tyrant. I would not assert that he beats his wife, but she certainly goes in considerable awe of him. His only son, Robin, has been forced to study political science and is dragged round at his father's chariot wheels, no doubt destined to be turned into a junior model."

"And that's our next Foreign Secretary. A fascist with a taste for gunboat diplomacy. What do you want to do? Tap *his* outgoing calls?"

"Yes. And have his mail opened. And have him watched day and night, in England and in France. If he's our man he'll slip up, sooner or later, and we've got to be there to catch him when he falls."

"*If* he's our man," said the Home Secretary. "And if he isn't, by any chance, and if he finds out what we're doing—there'll be an explosion which will rock Whitehall from end to end."

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"So I should imagine."

"The first head that will roll will be mine. But make no mistake about it, Fortescue. The second will be yours."

The young Customs Officer at Heathrow Airport produced a printed form and said, "You know the regulations, sir?"

"Since I have traveled backwards and forwards to Paris some twelve times this year," said Sir James Docherty, "I think you may assume that I have a nodding acquaintance with the regulations."

"And have you made any purchases while you were abroad?"

"None whatever."

"Or acquired any currency?"

Sir James looked up sharply and said, "I don't *acquire* currency when I travel. I spend it."

"I see, sir. Then would you mind opening this valise?"

"I would mind very much."

"I'm afraid you must, sir."

"Perhaps you would be good enough to examine the seal on the lock. I take it you are capable of recognizing an Embassy Seal?"

"Yes, sir."

"And perhaps you would also read this note from our Ambassador, requesting you to confer the customary exemption from search on this bag which, I might add, contains important diplomatic documents."

The Customs Officer glanced at the letter, then handed it to the thick-set man in a raincoat who was standing beside the counter. This man said, "I'm afraid, sir, that I have an order here, signed by the Home Secretary, overriding the Ambassador's request."

"And who the hell are you?"

"My name's Calder."

"Then let me tell you, Mr. Calder—"

"I think we ought to finish this in private."

Sir James started to say that he was damned if he would, realized that he was shouting and that people were starting to look at him, and resumed his public-relations manner.

"If you wish to continue this farce," he said in a choked voice, "by all means let us do it in private."

"But it wasn't a farce," said Mr. Calder. "There were three thousand pounds, in fivers, stowed away flat, at the bottom of his valise."

"What explanation did he give?"

"He was past rational explanation. He screamed a bit and stamped and foamed at the mouth. Literally, I thought he was having some sort of fit."

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"But no explanation?"

"I gathered, in the end, that he said someone must have been tampering with his baggage. Frameup. Police State. Gestapo. That sort of line."

"I see," said Mr. Fortescue. He said it so flatly that it made Mr. Calder look up.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

"I gather," said Fortescue, "that Sir James has managed to persuade our masters that we have made a very grave mistake."

"But good God! I *saw* the notes. We all did. How does he suggest they got there?"

"He suggests," said Mr. Fortescue sadly, "that Behrens put them there. I am seeing the Home Secretary in an hour's time. I rather fear that we may be in for trouble."

"Incredible though it may seem," said the Home Secretary, "it really does appear that the one person who couldn't have put the money there was Sir James himself—unless he bribed half the Ambassador's private staff."

"What exactly happened?"

"Our Ambassador had a highly confidential document—a memorandum in the General's own hand—and Sir James offered to act as courier. The Head of Chancery put the document in Sir James's valise—which was almost empty as it happens—saw the valise sealed, and handed it to the Ambassador's Secretary, who took it back to the hotel and himself saw it locked up in Sir James's bedroom. The Secretary didn't leave the hotel. He stayed there, lunched with young Robin, and the two of them escorted the valise to the Airport."

"And what was Sir James doing all this time?"

"Sir James was having lunch with our Ambassador, the French Minister of the Interior, and the wife of the French Minister of the Interior."

"How precisely is it suggested that the notes got into the valise?"

"There's no mystery about that. Microscopic examination of the seal—what was left of it—shows that it had been removed, whole, with a hot knife and refixed with adhesive. Probably during lunch hour."

"And it's suggested that Behrens did that?"

"He was at the hotel."

"So were two hundred other people."

"You don't think, Fortescue, that he might—just conceivably—have thought he was being helpful."

Mr. Fortescue said, "I have known Behrens for thirty years. Impossible." After a pause he

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added, "What is Sir James going to do?"

"He's been to the Prime Minister. He wants the people responsible discovered and dealt with."

Mr. Fortescue smiled a wintry smile. He said, "I do not often find myself in agreement with Sir James, but that sentiment is one with which I heartily concur. I shall need to make an immediate telephone call to Paris."

"I'm afraid you won't catch Behrens. He's on his way back."

"Excellent," said Mr. Fortescue. He seemed to have recovered his good humor. "Excellent. We may need him. The person I wished to speak to was the Ambassador's Private Secretary. Perhaps your office could arrange it for me? Oh, and the manager of the Hôtel Continental. Then we must have Behrens intercepted at the airport and brought straight round to Sir James's house—to meet me there."

"You're going to see Sir James?"

"I have really no alternative," said Mr. Fortescue genially. "In his present mood he would certainly not come to see us, would he?"

Sir James was at ease in front of his drawing-room fire, the bottom button of his waistcoat undone, a glass of port in one hand, an admiring audience of two, consisting of wife and son, hanging on every word.

"And it might have come off," he said, "if I hadn't been wide-awake and, I admit it, had a bit of luck. I could have been in a very awkward spot."

"And now it's them who are on the spot," said Robin with a grin.

"In the old days," said Lady Docherty, "they'd have had their heads cut off."

"Even if they don't lose their heads I think we can be sure that the people concerned will lose their jobs. I'm seeing the Prime Minister again tomorrow. I wonder who *that* can be?"

"I'll go," said Robin. "The girl's out. What do I do if it's a reporter?"

"Invite him in. The wider the publicity this deplorable matter receives the better for"—he was going to say "my chances at the next election," but changed it to—"the country."

Robin came back, followed by two men. "I don't think it *is* the Press," he said. "It's a Mr. Fortescue and a Mr. Behrens."

"I see," said Sir James coldly. "Well, I've nothing much to say to you that can't be said, in due course, in front

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of a Tribunal of Enquiry, but if you've come to apologize I'm quite willing to listen. No, stay where you are, my dear. And you too, Robin. The more witnesses we have, the better."

"I agree," said Mr. Behrens.

"Kind of you."

"It would be appropriate if your son were to remain since most of what I have to say concerns him." Mr. Fortescue swung round on the boy, ignoring Sir. James. "I've just spoken to the Ambassador's Private Secretary in Paris. He tells me that you were away from the luncheon table for nearly half an hour. Making a long-distance call, you said. Why did you lie about it?"

"Don't answer him," said Sir James. But the boy appeared to have forgotten about his father. He said, in his pleasant, level voice, "What makes you think it was a lie, sir?"

"I know it was a lie because I've talked to the hotel manager. He tells me that no long-distance call in or out was recorded during that period. On the other hand, Behrens here saw you leave the dining room. He followed you up to the bedroom, saw you go in, and heard you lock the door."

"And who do you suppose," fumed Sir James, "is going to believe your agent provocateur?"

"Well, Robin," Mr. Fortescue went on, "if you *weren't* telephoning, what were you doing?"

Sir James jumped up and forced himself between them. "I'll deal with this," he said. "If you think you can shift the blame onto my son on manufactured evidence—"

"Don't you think he might be allowed to speak for himself?"

"No, I don't."

"He'll have to sooner or later."

"Unless you can produce something better than the word of your own spy he's not going to have to answer at all."

"Oh, there's plenty of evidence," said Mr. Fortescue mildly. "Robin's been a member of the Action Committee of your Society for two years—that's right, isn't it, Robin? I would surmise that during all that time he's been using *your* diplomatically protected luggage to bring back funds for the Committee from France."

"Lies," said Sir James in a strangled voice.

"He has also taken a personal part in a number of demonstrations. He was up in the Midlands last week—"

"Collecting information for me."

"No doubt. He also put in some time kicking a police

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superintendent. Have you the photographs, Behrens?"

Sir James glared at the photograph. "A fake!"

Robin said, "Oh, stop bluffing, Dad. Of course it isn't faked. How could it be?"

There was a moment of complete silence, broken by Lady Docherty who said, "Robin" faintly.

"Keep out of this, mother."

Sir James recovered his voice. He said, "Your mother has every right—"

"Neither of you," said Robin, silencing his parent with surprising ease, "has any rights in the matter at all. I'm twenty-one. And I know what I'm doing. You talk about violence and ruthlessness, Dad. But that's all you ever do—you and your Peaceful People. Talk, talk. I don't believe"— a faint smile illuminated his young face —"that you've ever actually hit anyone in your life. Really hit them, meaning to hurt. Have you?" Sir James was past speech. "Well, I have, and I'm going to go on doing it, because if you truly believe in something that's the only way you're going to make it happen—in your own lifetime anyway. By breaking the law and hurting people and smashing things. And young people all over the world have seen it. They know what to do. Don't talk. Kick out."

Mr. Fortescue said, "I take it that includes kicking people when they're on the ground."

"Of course," said Robin. "It's much easier to kick them when they're lying down than when they're standing up. Why not?"

"I left that to Sir James to answer," said Mr. Fortescue, sometime later, to the Home Secretary. "He's a politician and used to answering awkward questions."

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... and now the startling conclusion of

THE CLUE OF THE RUNAWAY BLONDE

(continued from page 105)

The little group in the cabin at the Stanwood Auto Court talked in low voices.

"All right, Roy," the sheriff said, "I think it's your move."

Roy Jasper shifted his position uneasily. "I didn't want Beryl to know about this," he said. "I suppose I was foolish. After all, there was no reason why — oh, well, it would have meant explaining and —"

"Go ahead," the sheriff said.

"It began last week," Roy said, "when I was in San Rodolpho on official business. I ate in a cafeteria and—well, the cashier was a good-looking blonde, and I got to passing the time of day with her. I told her I was from Rockville and that I certainly hated to be so close to home without going on up to see my friends, and she laughed and wanted to know whether it was friends, plural, or *a* friend, singular, and we got to chatting."

"Then what?"

"Well, then she asked me about whether I knew Marvin Higbee, and I told her he was dead, and she asked a few questions about the place, and I told her something about the lawsuit. Well —"

"Go ahead," the sheriff said.

"Well, I could see this girl kept wanting to talk about Higbee, and finally she told me the story. Her mother nursed Higbee during his last illness, and then in Colorado her mother became critically ill and sent for the daughter. The daughter was there for a couple of days before the mother died, and the mother told her that Higbee had said to her in effect, 'If anything happens and I shouldn't pull through, you've got to do something for me. He'll pay you for it and pay you well—make him pay. I told him he'd have to pay,' but he wouldn't tell her any more than that, just that she'd be paid well for what she was to do.

"Higbee had had a stroke and it had paralyzed one side. Then the day before he died, he had another stroke and knew he wasn't going to make it. The nurse could see that he wanted

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to tell her something very badly, but there was always someone else in the room. No one trusted anyone else—people were waiting, watching. The housekeeper kept flitting around, and the doctor was there, in and out, and Carlotta, the man's favorite sister, was there almost constantly, and business associates kept hanging around.

"Finally, in desperation, Higbee said to her, talking apparently with great effort, 'Remember, I said you'd have to do something,' and she nodded, and just then Carlotta came and stood by the bed, and Higbee frowned and said with the effort that talking costs a man who has had a stroke, 'The joke is behind the joker,' and that was all.

"Carlotta kept asking, 'What was that? What about a joker?' But he closed his eyes and pretended he couldn't hear her. But the nurse felt certain that it was a message for her, but she never was able to figure it out. Higbee died the next day, and there was, of course, no further necessity for a nurse.

"Well, Elizabeth kept thinking over what her mother had told her, and after her mother's death she began to wonder if it hadn't been related to something in the house, so she started pumping me about the Higbee place, and I told her all I knew. Elizabeth wanted me to go with her and see if we couldn't find something in the house, but of course she swore me to absolute secrecy.

"Well, it was an adventure, and I was there in San Rodolpho on official business. I got off once to come up and see Beryl, but the rest of the time they held me there so I couldn't go anywhere. Then I went back to Fort Bixling, and then I got this furlough and—well, I'd promised Elizabeth that I'd get in touch with her the first chance I had. So I did, and she insisted that I mustn't call anyone, or let anyone know about what we were going to do. She said she'd drive me up in her car, and that after I'd helped her locate what she wanted I could get in touch with my *friends* up here. I think she was just a little bit hurt that I was so eager to—well, you know."

Beryl nodded.

"So when I left Camp Bixling yesterday morning, I took the bus up to San Rodolpho. I'd telephoned her that I was coming. She met me in the cafeteria. We talked for a while, and then we had some lunch put up, got in her car, and drove up to the old Higbee place. It certainly was a mess. I found that a passkey I'd picked up in a hardware store would

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work the lock on the side door, and we went in and prowled all around the place."

"Find anything?" the sheriff asked.

Roy said, "At the time I didn't think that we had, but now—well, now I don't know."

The sheriff raised his eyebrows, asking a silent question.

"You see," Roy said, "we were sitting down eating lunch—in fact, we'd finished lunch and I'd had a cigarette, and I think she had—when all of a sudden we heard a car drive up. Well, you know, there'd been so much trouble among the heirs and, after all, we'd really broken into the place—I'd used a passkey—so we jumped up and ran to the window. It was all covered with cobwebs, but I could vaguely see a car and people coming to the house.

"So I grabbed her hand and we ran away from the window and dashed for the side door. We played hide and seek around there for a while until the people walked around the other side of the house, then we ran out and jumped in her car and drove away."

"You saw those people?"

"Yes, after we'd got out of the house. It was Sam Beckett and John Farnham. They didn't see us. Farnham was evidently selling the place to Beckett. Anyway, I let Elizabeth drive me back to San Rodolpho, and I waited until evening and then telephoned Beryl. I didn't want to tell Beryl that I was in San Rodolpho, so I told her I was just leaving Fort Bixling—and well, that's all there was to it. I stuck around there, took the night bus, and came up here.

"Now, Elizabeth must have uncovered some clue to something she didn't want me to know about. After she took me back to San Rodolpho she must have turned around and driven right back up here. She told me she had a bad headache and was going up to her room and go to bed. And by that time I was thinking of Beryl. Elizabeth had been all right to kill a little time with when I was down where I couldn't see Beryl, but once I could get up here I was kicking myself for the time I'd wasted out of my furlough. When a soldier's in a strange town and is lonely, he'll do anything just to talk with some friendly girl.

"Well, that was it. I'd promised her I'd go up to the Higbee place with her and look it over, and I went, and that's all there was to it as far as I know."

"And you left your cigarette case there?" Beryl asked.

"Yes."

"But you had one the next morning when you—"

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Roy said, "I felt miserable about that. You see, Beryl, you sent me the cigarette case for Christmas, but I already had one cigarette case, so I used it for a spare. Then after I lost your—well, I intended to go back to the Higbee place and pick up the one with the engraving on it, but the one I showed you this morning was the spare. It was silver, about the same type as the one you gave me except for the engraving, and I held it so you couldn't see that the engraving wasn't on it. I was afraid that I couldn't explain to you about Elizabeth without you getting sore."

"You mustn't feel that way, Roy—ever."

"I know," he said, "now. But I wasn't sure."

A car drew up outside. The sound of excited voices mingled with hurried steps. A perfunctory knock on the door was followed by a turning of the knob and the influx of an excited group.

"*There* they are!" Lyons proclaimed dramatically.

District Attorney Rush Medford demanded angrily, "What's the idea?"

"Idea of what?" the sheriff drawled innocently.

"Spiriting these people away."

The sheriff's eyebrows went up. "We didn't spirit them anywhere. We're questioning them."

"I'm putting this young man under arrest for the murder of Elizabeth Dow."

"Got any evidence?" the sheriff asked.

"All the evidence in the world. That is, we will have as soon as we check some fingerprints. Beryl Quinlan thought she was wiping all the fingerprints off that cigarette case and she did—off the outside. But what everyone overlooked was the fact that at some time when the case had been empty and the owner was filling it with fresh cigarettes, he left his fingerprints on the *inside*, back of the cigarettes.

"Mr. Walworth very shrewdly deduced he'd find fingerprints there and carefully removed the cigarettes, then dusted the interior of the case, and we got some very fine latents. In my official capacity as district attorney of this County, Sheriff, I order you to take this man into custody."

"Suit yourself, but I'm not going to be the one to swear out the complaint," Bill Eldon drawled.

"*I* will swear out the complaint," Martin Walworth said, but then added hastily, "in the event it appears that this young man's fingerprints check

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with the latents I found on the inside of the cigarette case."

"We'll determine that in short order," the district attorney said.

They drove to the courthouse. Walworth made prints of Roy Jasper's fingertips. There was no concealing his anxiety as Walworth focused a magnifying glass on the latent prints and then compared them with the prints he had taken from Jasper's fingers.

Suddenly his face broke into a smile. He nodded triumphantly to the district attorney. "I think congratulations are in order," he said. "We have the right man!" He snapped the cigarette case shut with something of a flourish.

The night had turned clear and calm. Wintry stars blazed down with steady splendor. The pulsing throb of the motor on Sam Beckett's tractor punctuated the cold silence. The tractor headlights cast twin rows of illumination down the field which surrounded the old Higbee place.

The murder of Elizabeth Dow had been a dramatic chapter in Sam Beckett's farming operations. But, murder or no murder, the plowing had to be done, and Sam Beckett on the tractor was slowly rolling the soil into furrows which streamed out behind the tractor-driven plow.

Sheriff Eldon parked the County car at the gate and said to George Quinlan, "Looks as though we're going to have to walk, George. We can't drive this car through that freshly plowed ground."

Together the two men trudged along the plowed furrows, sinking to their ankles in the soft soil. They reached the strip of hard ground where the plows had not yet bitten into the soil, and walked more rapidly along the old abandoned roadway to where the Higbee house loomed as a massive shadow against the stars.

"Think there's something we've overlooked?" Quinlan asked anxiously.

"Gosh, yes," the sheriff admitted, "*lots* and *lots* of things we've overlooked. The human mind just ain't thorough enough to look for all the things it should see, or even to see the things that are yelling for attention. But that message now. Higbee said, 'The joke is behind the joker.' Now that must mean something."

"But what?" Quinlan asked.

"Well, now," the sheriff said, "the old-time kings used to have 'em—the little fellows with bells that danced around and made jokes."

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"Well?"

"I noticed that one of the pictures there was of a court scene with people talking, and this here court jester or joker with his cap and bells was out in the front part of the picture doing a little dance. Now you know that just *might* be what old Higbee had reference to."

"Could be," Quinlan agreed without enthusiasm. "By gosh, Bill, I hope you're right."

The sheriff said, "We gotta be right, George. They've got us in a vise and they're beginning to screw it pretty tight."

They entered the house, and the sheriff, using his flashlight, led the way into the big front room where a rat, perched defiantly on the back of what had once been an overstuffed chair, regarded them with glittering, malevolent eyes. The beam of the sheriff's flashlight fastened on the picture titled *Court Scene in the Middle Ages.*

There were the monarchs, the court beauties resplendent with dresses cut low in front, billowing out behind. There were statesmen gathered in a serious little group, and in the foreground was the court jester waving his fool's scepter, dancing and grinning, the bells on his cap jiggled into wild motion by his gyrations.

Quinlan approached the picture and tilted it out from the wall. His face, illuminated by reflections from the beam of the sheriff's spotlight, showed bitter disappointment.

"Wait a minute," the sheriff told him reassuringly. "You can't expect a man as smart as Higbee to have just pushed something up behind a picture where an accidental jar would have knocked it to the floor. When he said behind the joker, he really meant what he said. It must be *behind* the joker."

The sheriff took the picture down, placed it on a table, took a heavy-bladed pocket knife from his trousers and began prying at the brads which held the back of the picture in place. The brads came out easily, and the sheriff lifted out the cardboard section which backed the picture. He gave a low whistle.

Age had discolored the back of the picture, but that discoloration was slightly less pronounced over an oblong space some two and a half inches wide by six inches long.

"Gone!" Quinlan exclaimed.

The sheriff scratched the grizzled hair along the back of his head.

For some seconds they regarded the dismantled picture. Then the sheriff said, "Notice this was exactly behind the jester in the picture."

Quinlan's nod was perfunc-

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tory. "Knowing where it *was* isn't going to help us to *tell* where it *is*," he said.

Bill Eldon rehung the picture, and was meticulously careful to see that it was hanging straight.

"Now, clues," the sheriff said, when the picture had been hung to suit him, "are peculiar things. They're combinations of a little bit of everything. Lots of clues get thrown out the window, just lots of them. Now, take that girl for instance, lying face down and stabbed. Notice something about her, George?"

"What?"

"No purse."

"You mean she . . . Say, that's right! She *didn't* have any purse."

"No purse," the sheriff said. "That wouldn't mean so much by itself, because she might have been running and somebody was chasing her and caught up with her and stabbed her, and her purse might have been left at the place where she started to run from, or she may have left it somewhere here in the house. But we don't find it here in the house—"

"Go on," Quinlan said eagerly.

"Simple as can be," the sheriff observed. "This Dow girl was pretty smart. You have to be quick-thinking to be a cashier in a cafeteria. That's not the sort of job you can go to sleep on. Well, she got Roy Jasper to come up here to the house with her, show her around, and take the responsibility of getting the door open. Then she started searching, and the probabilities are she hadn't searched very long before she stumbled onto this picture and that gave her an idea she was on the right track.

"So what does she do? Does she tell Roy what she's discovered and then let him dismantle the picture with her? She does not. She stalls, pretends she hasn't noticed anything, gets rid of Roy, and then later on comes back by herself. It's late afternoon. She doesn't drive her car inside the gate. She leaves it down the road a ways and walks in. And just as she's congratulating herself on being smart, the gate opens and Sam Beckett comes through with a tractor and starts plowing.

"The girl can't walk out of the house in broad daylight and stumble across that plowed ground where Sam Beckett will ask her what she's been up to and who she is. So she waits for darkness to make her getaway.

"So she sits still, and by and by it begins to get dark and she hears all the little night noises—and then she hears a

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new noise. Someone else has been hiding in the house, someone else who was waiting for it to get dark. She hears cautious steps, a board creaks, all the night noises stop—all except this steady, stealthy approach of someone who's been hiding in the house—waiting.

"She fights back panic, clutches her purse, gropes her way to the side door, and starts running. And the thing behind her, the thing that's been waiting for darkness to make its stealthy approach, starts running, too."

"Gosh, Bill," Quinlan said, "you're building up quite a scene from just a few clues—from the absence of a few clues, in fact."

"But that's the way it had to be," the sheriff said. "If she'd come in *after* Beckett started plowing, her tracks would be in the plowed ground, and by counting the furrows where these tracks quit, you could tell just how far Beckett had got with his plowing before she walked in. But there aren't *any* tracks. So both the girl and the person who killed her must have come in before the plowing started."

"Guess you're right, Bill."

"Well, she broke and run. What did she run for?"

"Her automobile."

"No, George, I don't think so. You have to put yourself in her shoes. She ran for the *closest* protection she could find."

"The tractor!" Quinlan exclaimed.

"Now you're gettin' it, son. She'd been hiding from the man on the tractor, but now, all of a sudden, she wanted to be near him mighty bad. She was running *for* the tractor—then something made her swerve."

"How do you know she swerved? Maybe she just didn't get there."

"Nope. The body was found on the plowed ground. That means she got to the furrow the tractor was plowing, and swerved. Now what would make her detour *away* from safety just when she was getting close?"

Quinlan shook his head. Then after a moment he said, "The trouble with all this is it leaves the *murderer* in here. How could he have got out if there were no tracks?"

"He left tracks, George."

"He couldn't have, Bill. He didn't."

"Oh, bosh!" the sheriff said. "Sure he left tracks. He left the sort of tracks that nobody bothered to look at. That's the angle I'm working on now, the way the murderer got out of here."

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"You mean he went out on Sam Beckett's tractor? You mean—?"

The sheriff suddenly slid from the end of the table. "Come on, son," he said to Quinlan. "We've got a job to do—and we've got to do it fast."

Lights blazed in the office of Rush Medford. Edward Lyons sat near the telephone where he could rush in reports to his newspaper. Martin Walworth, his bushy eyebrows drawn to ominous lines, gave Roy Jasper and Beryl Quinlan the benefit of his accusing gaze. The court reporter, his pen moving smoothly over a shorthand notebook, took down the questions and answers.

Rush Medford looked up as Bill Eldon and the deputy entered the room. There was exasperation on his face. For more than an hour and a half now they had been grilling the suspects and they knew just as much as they had known before, no more, no less.

Sheriff Eldon's slow drawl came as a sharp change from the staccato bark of questions which had been fired by the criminologist. The sheriff pulled off his big sombrero, grinned at the district attorney, turned to Walworth and said, "Well, I guess I have to admit that some of these rule-of-thumb methods aren't as good as these modern scientific methods."

Walworth said angrily, "If these two would consent to a lie-detector test I'd very soon tell you what's—"

"You mean they won't?" the sheriff interrupted.

Beryl Quinlan said, "As long as you are antagonistic to my father we aren't going to cooperate. We'll answer questions, and that's all."

"Come, come," the sheriff said soothingly. "Why don't you take a lie-detector test, Beryl? It might help things along."

"We will if you say so."

Walworth heaved an audible sigh of relief. "I'd want them to step in this room one at a time," he said.

"Sure, sure," the sheriff announced. "Go ahead, Beryl."

The district attorney glanced suspiciously at the sheriff, but his suspicions seemed allayed by the guileless expression on the veteran's grizzled countenance.

Walworth had his apparatus all set up and it took him only a few minutes to take Beryl Quinlan into another office where he spent some twelve minutes with her on the lie-detector. Then he called for Roy Jasper, strapped the electrodes and controls to him,

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and again propounded his questions.

At the end of that time Walworth rejoined the others.

"They're telling the truth," he announced glumly.

"I thought so," the sheriff said. "You know, I don't know much about these new-fangled things, so us old-timers have to rely on human nature and character, and figuring what a person would do under certain circumstances and—"

"That," Walworth announced harshly, "is all bosh. The man doesn't live who can judge guilt or innocence by trusting to the perceptions of his auditory nerves. It's merely a means by which the old-fashioned officer gave free rein to his prejudices. It's no more reliable than locating a well by a forked willow stick."

"Well, well, well," the sheriff said, "now I'd always put a lot of store by all that, and I've seen some mighty good wells—"

Medford interrupted to ask pointedly, "Did you have some reason for this visit, Sheriff?"

"Sure," the sheriff said. "I just came to ask Walworth one question. I've been reading somewhere about the identification of hairs. Seems to me like I read you can identify a hair—not only what kind of a hair it is, but you can tell a lot about the age and condition of the person or animal it came from."

"Yes," Walworth said shortly. He was definitely not encouraging this cordiality on the part of the sheriff.

"Well, now," the sheriff went on, "that's fine, because it occurs to me that you might be able to help me solve this case."

"I'll solve it myself," Walworth said.

"Now, now," the sheriff cautioned. "No need to get on your high horse like that. I just thought we might sort of work together, since you're here."

"I've been retained by the district attorney to solve this case," Walworth said.

"Well, now, that's fine," the sheriff beamed, "because I'm employed by the County to do the same thing, so we might just as well sort of work along together."

"I have my methods, and you have yours."

"Sure, sure. Now take your methods, for instance. How do you think the murderer got out of that Higbee place without leaving tracks on the plowed ground?"

"I think tracks were there, but they were obliterated by your slipshod methods. I think that Sam Beckett must have walked in the tracks of the murderer, and when you subsequently walked in the

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tracks of Sam Beckett you managed to obliterate the murderer's tracks. That's the only logical explanation."

The sheriff grinned. "And suppose his tracks *were* obliterated—the tracks he made going up to the body? Then what? How'd he get *out* of the place? He was in the middle of a field and soft plowed ground was all around him—just like a man who's painted himself into the middle of a floor by beginning at the outer edge of the room."

The sheriff ceased speaking and grinned at Walworth's evident discomfiture.

"Well, now," the sheriff went on, "suppose this girl had found a paper that was sort of incriminating to some people, and someone wanted to get that paper, someone that was snooping around the house watching her. She started to run. Well, she was young and trim, and maybe this man felt he couldn't catch her, running after her; but just suppose he'd already arranged for a means of quick escape—something that required the use of a silk rope with tassels on it—the twisted silk rope that held the drapes over that door, for instance."

Walworth looked at the sheriff as though doubting the officer's sanity. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"A horse," the sheriff said. "That cord was about eight feet long, long enough to tie around a horse's neck, make a half hitch over his nose—and when the girl ran out of the house with whatever it was the man wanted, he ran out and got on his horse.

"It was dark and he couldn't see her, but he knew she'd run for the tractor, so he galloped his horse straight for the tractor. The girl could see him 'cause she was looking up, and a man on a horse shows up against the sky, even when it's cloudy, while a man on a horse, looking down, has a hard time seeing something on the ground at night. But by galloping toward the tractor, the man made the girl *think* he could see her, and she swerved and screamed, and then the man on the horse *did* see her."

"And all this time the man on the tractor didn't see or hear anything?" Walworth asked skeptically.

The sheriff grinned. "Guess you've never plowed on a tractor at night," he said. "What with the roar of the motor and having to watch the furrows, you don't see or hear much."

"Go ahead," Walworth said curtly.

"Well," the sheriff went on, "this man caught up with the

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girl and jumped off. By that time the girl had been running a long way and the man was fresh. He caught her just as she stumbled and fell, right on the edge of the plowed ground. The purse was what he wanted. After he stabbed her, he got the purse. And the horse, being a trained cattle horse, stood there stock-still as long as the rope was dragging on the ground.

The man finished his murder, got back on the horse, and rode in a series of aimless circles around the plowed ground so it wouldn't look as though a horse was being directed by a rider in a straight line to the fence. But the man got to the fence all right after making a few turns. He rode the horse alongside the fence, slid off on the other side of the fence, untied the silk rope, and turned the horse loose. The horse wandered back around the plowed ground. Because we were all looking for the tracks of a murderer and because a whole field full of horses were galloping around and cutting didoes, nobody paid any attention to the horse tracks in the plowed ground.

"The man that was doing the plowing came on around, and because he was watching the edge of the plowed ground pretty sharp, plowed right past the figure on the ground without seeing it. In fact, he didn't see it until he'd made a couple more turns and the moon had come up."

Sheriff Eldon's audience was listening with rapt attention.

"So I sort of thought," the sheriff said, "that if you'd take that microscope and examine the pants of this here murderer, you might find where some of the horse's hairs had worked into the man's pants, and then if you could prove they were the same hairs from the old bay saddle-horse that John Farnham sold Sam Beckett a while ago, you just might find someone to put that lie detector on."

Walworth looked at the sheriff blankly.

"You see," the sheriff went on, "the murderer would have to be somebody that knew how to ride pretty well, and who knew which one of the horses in that field was saddle-broke."

Farnham got to his feet. "What in hell are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Just thought it might be a good plan to take a look at those pants of yours," the sheriff said, "and then I thought maybe you'd like to take a lie-detector test, seeing we're going in for some of this new-fangled scientific business."

"You're crazy!" Farnham said. "But look at my pants all you damn please."

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"Not those pants," the sheriff said. "You probably went home and took your pants off and left them to be sent to the cleaner; but you see, John, I read in the paper that your wife had gone away for a long visit, and it occurred to me that if you're sort of batching around the place, there wouldn't be anybody to send stuff out to the cleaners, so the pants may still be in your house. You know, it's a great thing in these country towns to read the newspapers and keep up with—"

Farnham lost his head and rushed the sheriff.

The neat agility with which the sheriff swung to one side was matched only by the smoothly timed precision with which his left hand blocked Farnham's blow. His right came up in a smashing impact to the jaw.

"Well, now," the sheriff said, tugging handcuffs from his belt, "I thought maybe he'd lose his head."

To the little group gathered in the front room of John Farnham's house, Martin Walworth displayed his findings.

"These trousers," he said, "have numerous hairs from a bay horse worked into the cloth. It's very evident that this horse was being ridden bareback. I'll want real tests, but I would say from the texture of the hairs that it was a horse from fifteen to twenty years old."

"Tut, tut," the sheriff said reproachfully. "He told Beckett it was twelve."

"And," Walworth went on, "on the coat of the same suit there are not only hairs from the same horse, but on the right coat sleeve near the cuff are unmistakable stains of human blood. An examination will show whether this blood is of the same type as that of the young woman who was killed. The subject refuses to take a lie-detector test."

"Well, now," the sheriff said in his slow drawl, "having gone that far, I guess we might as well go a little farther and sort of look around and see if we can't find the purse that he took from that girl. He probably wanted to get rid of it somewhere, and—well, you know, I wouldn't be too surprised if he might have buried it out in the back yard. Just suppose we sort of take a look around there."

The search of the back yard proved fruitless. But the sheriff worked with painstaking patience. He went over every inch of the ground, then searched the house.

Eventually they found what

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they wanted in a closet in the basement. Behind some preserves was a purse containing the driving license of Elizabeth Dow, whose address was San Rodolpho. And in that purse was a folded paper. On that paper were two photographs and ten fingerprints. One of the photographs was of John Farnham's profile; one was full-face. The sheriff read the paper and grinned.

"Now, Higbee was a smooth one," he said. "When John Farnham came to this County and started in being a real-estate agent, a professional reformer, and a political crusader, the rest of us just took him as a pain in the neck, but old Marvin Higbee evidently got some detectives and spent a little money finding out where Farnham came from. Maybe he got some fingerprints from letting Farnham's hand get pressed against a glass window some time. But you see what he got—this little dodger says: WANTED FOR EMBEZZLEMENT.

"No wonder Farnham quit agitating for an investigation of that school-construction job. Higbee had this and he let Farnham know he had it. You can consider how Farnham felt when Higbee died, the fruitless searches he must have made—and then the feeling of security—until he knew someone else was searching. Well, there's your motive, men."

The district attorney stretched out his hand. "I'll take charge of that," he said.

"Well, now," the sheriff drawled, "it seems to me that I'm still the sheriff of this here County. I uncovered the evidence and if you don't mind, boys, I think the sheriff's office is going to take charge of it. And if anybody else thinks different, why, the line forms on the right, and you can put your coats on that old chair over there until we get done with the argument. I'm kinda old, but I'm still spry."

No one said anything.

The sheriff took the purse and paper into his custody. "And now," he said to Martin Walworth, "you've really educated me, sir. You have, for a fact. It seems that evidence should be fixed up so it can't be substituted, and since you've been called in as a criminologist by the district attorney to help clean up this crime, and since the bill is going to be passed on to the taxpayers, whom I happen to represent, you might just as well sign your name on the margin of this here piece of paper so there won't be any chance of its being substituted or any smart lawyers raising any question as to whether or not it's the same piece of paper we

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found hidden in the house here. Thank you, sir. Thank you kindly."

Old Bill Eldon seemed tired as he settled down in his favorite easy chair.

"You're home early," his wife said.

"Yep. Got all finished up down at the courthouse."

"Thought you were working on that murder case," Doris said.

"I was."

Her eyes snapped with interest. "You mean you've got it solved?"

"That's right."

"Who did it?"

"John Farnham."

"John Farnham!" Doris almost screamed. "How'd you know it was John Farnham?"

"It had to be John," the sheriff said wearily.

"What clues pointed to him?"

"No clues," the sheriff said, "just human nature."

His wife asked, "What was it, Bill? Are you too tired to tell us?"

"No," the sheriff said, "I'm not too tired. But I just got sort of sick of the case. You see, Elizabeth Dow was murdered when she got to snooping around and found an old paper that Marvin Higbee had left in the house. Well, that old paper had been there for a long time and nobody had bothered about it, but the minute the Dow girl started looking, somebody sat up and took notice.

"Well, naturally, you'd sort of figure that it was because Elizabeth Dow went there that the murderer became alarmed and felt he had to do something, so the question was, who knew she went there? Well, it seems that Roy Jasper knew it, but he didn't tell anyone, and it seems her automobile was parked out in front when Sam Beckett and John Farnham drove up. Sam Beckett was only interested in buying the place, but John Farnham was in the real-estate business and he was trying to get Beckett to buy it. Well, that's all there was to it. As soon as I heard that, I knew what must have happened."

"What?" his wife asked.

"Why," the sheriff said, "anybody that knows anything about real-estate people knows that when a place is for sale and a realtor who has it listed comes up and finds a car parked and somebody apparently looking over the place, he does just one thing—takes the license number of the car and looks it up to see who was interested. It's a habit that real-estate people have.

"So when John Farnham looked up the license number

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and found the name Elizabeth Dow, he immediately put two and two together, because he knew that Elvira Dow had nursed Higbee in his last illness. So Farnham closed the deal with Sam Beckett and then beat it down to San Rodolpho to see Elizabeth Dow. But he met her coming back—only, of course, *she* didn't recognize *him*.

"So John tagged along behind her car to see where she was going. When it turned out to be the Higbee place again, John followed her in, got a carving knife out of the drawer in the sideboard, and—oh, shucks! There wasn't anything to it soon as you got to figuring Farnham would naturally note the license number of any car parked at the place."

"And that's the way you solved the case?" Doris asked.

"That's about it."

Doris sniffed, "And to think the taxpayers hand you money for *that!* Why, *everyone* knows how real-estate people jot down car numbers!"

The sheriff chuckled. "This here consulting criminologist didn't know it. If he did he didn't think of it—not until after I pointed it out to him."

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a NEW Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the 10th in the series about Nick Velvet, the contemporary Raffles. Nick Velvet, you will recall, is a thief with a unique "angle": he steals only the bizarre, the baroque, and only if the object is valueless—never anything as mundane as jewels or cash.

Nick's newest assignment is "out of this world." All we ask is that you read the title, and if you don't immediately plunge into the story we'll be surprised. Imagine—hired to steal a dinosaur's tail! Absolutely no kidding! And as usual in Nick's most recent adventures, he has to be a topnotch detective in order to be a topnotch thief . . .

THE THEFT OF THE DINOSAUR'S TAIL

by EDWARD D. HOCH

THE AFFAIR OF THE Dinosaur's Tail really began on the day of the Rockland County horse trials, when Nick Velvet met a man named Frader Kincaid. It was a gloomy October Sunday, with a definite threat of rain, and Nick had driven up because Gloria wanted to watch the jumpers.

"Nicky," she had told him, "there's nothing more exciting than watching those horses take the jumps with hardly a break in stride."

Nick, who could think of several things more exciting to watch, had felt it was one of those rare occasions when he must humor Gloria, and so they'd made the trip to Rockland County. She proved to know more about horses than he'd imagined, readily explaining to his disinterested ear the features of a double oxer or of parallel bars.

"Isn't it thrilling?" she asked at one point.

"I suppose so," Nick replied.

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His eyes were following a tall, trimly built man on a chestnut mare. The man seemed to be one of the jump judges.

Presently there was some commotion across the field, and they could see that one of the horses had thrown its youthful rider at a water jump. The standby ambulance started toward the scene and the other riders were held at their starting point. The man on the chestnut mare watched for a time through his binoculars, then cantered over to Nick's car.

"Looks like rain," he said, smiling. "Enjoying the show?"

"We were until now." Nick motioned across the field. "Is the rider badly hurt?"

"No, no! Just had the wind knocked out of her. It's Lynn Peters, one of our new members. I'm afraid she's not up to water jumps yet." He seemed to remember that he hadn't introduced himself. "I'm Frader Kincaid, master of the hunt here. You folks coming to the open house afterwards?"

"We're not members," Nick told him.

"Don't worry about that—it's open to all. The big house at the top of the hill. I'll be looking for you."

When Kincaid had ridden away, Gloria tugged on Nick's sleeve. "I'd love to go for a little while, Nicky."

He sighed and nodded, seeing there was no way out. "We'll stop by."

When Nick and Gloria arrived at the house on the hill two hours later, the party was already in full swing. A light rain had started to fall, but it hadn't dampened any spirits. Middle-aged men and somewhat younger women in riding togs filled two large downstairs rooms, sipping cocktails while they chattered and giggled and generally relaxed. It was not Nick's sort of gathering, but he knew Gloria would enjoy it.

"Glad you could make it," Kincaid greeted them. It was obvious now that the house was his, and the party was his also. "Martinis all right?"

"Fine."

He produced two with a smile and then hooked an arm around the waist of a passing girl. "This is Lynn Peters, who scared us all with her fall this afternoon. Feeling better, Lynn?"

She was young and sandy-haired, with cheeks flushed pink from drink or embarrassment. Her riding breeches and red corduroy vest fitted her well, and she was quick with a smile that included them all. "I'm fine now, Frader. My mount just didn't like the looks of that water hole."

Kincaid smiled benevolently.

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"Why don't you girls talk it over while I show Mr. Velvet my den? I have a nice collection I'd like to show him."

Nick followed the tall man through a door at the far end of the room, into a book-lined study that overlooked the valley where the horse trials had been held. "Beautiful country, even on a rainy day," Kincaid commented.

Nick sipped his drink and asked, "How did you happen to know my name?"

"Oh, you noticed that? Once down at the Yacht Club someone pointed you out to me. I recognized you watching the jumps today and thought I might interest you in a business venture."

"My business activities are strictly limited."

Frader Kincaid moved around to the side of the desk, carefully resting his cocktail glass on a used envelope. "You're a professional thief, Mr. Velvet, and that's exactly the sort of venture I have in mind."

Nick's expression didn't change. He simply said, "My fee is quite large—$20,000—and I steal only objects of little or no value."

"I understand all that."

"What is the object you had in mind?"

Kincaid motioned toward the wall between the bookcases where an elaborate oil painting hung. It was an odd subject for a rich man's wall—a prehistoric scene of two dinosaurs locked in deadly combat against a dank swampy landscape. "How much do you know of these things, Mr. Velvet?"

"Nothing I didn't learn from the monster films when I was a kid."

"I publish several lines of paperbound books, and this was the cover painting for a science-fiction novel. I liked the painting, even if the book lost money. Only one thing sells these days." He grinned and chose a book at random from the case beside him. Nick needed only a glance at the bare-bosomed model and the sex-slang title to know the kind of book it was.

"You publish pornography?" he asked Kincaid.

"I publish what the people buy. One year it's dinosaurs, the next it's derrières. Makes not a particle of difference to me."

Nick merely grunted. He was hardly in a position to comment on other men's morals. "What is it you want stolen?"

Kincaid tapped the framed painting with his index finger. "This one is a Tyrannosaurus Rex, the largest flesh-eating

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creature that ever existed. Its teeth alone were eight inches long, and its total length was something like fifty feet. The Brontosaurus was larger, of course, but it ate only herbs and plants."

"You seem to know a great deal about them."

"It's a hobby of mine." Kincaid smiled with satisfaction. "But to get to the point, Mr. Velvet. You are familiar with the Museum of Ancient History in upper Manhattan?"

"Of course."

"They have a fine complete skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus Rex there. I want you to steal its tail."

Nick Velvet simply stared at him, letting the words sink in. He had received some strange assignments in his career, but never anything like stealing the tail from a museum's dinosaur skeleton. "Not the whole thing? Just the tail?"

"Just the tail. The last few bones of the tail, to be exact."

"All right. How soon do you need it?"

"Before the end of the week. I do believe it was fate that brought you here today, just when I needed you." He walked a few steps to a small wall safe and returned with a packet of money. "This much in advance. The rest when you deliver the tail."

They shook hands and Nick pocketed the money. Then he left the room in search of Gloria. When he found her she was looking unhappy. "I never thought you were coming back, Nicky!"

"Didn't you enjoy your chat with Lynn Peters?"

"Not really. She doesn't actually know too much about jumping." Gloria put down her glass. "Maybe we should go now, Nicky. They really aren't our sort of people."

"No," he agreed. "I don't think they are."

On Monday morning Nick drove down to New York. He left the Major Deegan Expressway at 155th Street and crossed the Harlem River into Manhattan's northern limits. From there it was only a five-minute drive to the Museum of Ancient History, a big rambling red-brick monstrosity that reminded him of the Smithsonian on a bad day. The parking lot was nearly deserted this early, and he pulled up near the front entrance.

Inside, the place was all that its exterior promised—high ceilings with dusty skylights, marble floors, an air of mustiness that seemed to filter right through his clothes. It was everything a museum of the 1920's should have been, and if

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it was still that way nearly a half century later, one could only sigh with regret and remember those earlier, grander days.

Nick made his way through the Egyptian Room and the Etruscan Wing, coming at last to the Hall of Great Reptiles. And there it was, in all its baroque splendor—Tyrannosaurus Rex, towering 25 feet into the air and stretching back nearly 50 feet from head to tail. There was something sad and oddly dated about the hundreds of polished bones wired together as a memorial to this creature of long ago. After the indignities of the zoo, would modern animals be subjected to such extravagancies, too? He'd read somewhere that only 600 tigers remained in the world, and he wondered if some future generation might be forced to view the skeleton of a charging Bengal as he now viewed this blanched relic.

He walked the full length of the great beast and paused to examine the jointed tail section. There was certainly nothing remarkable about the dozens of small bones that made up the tail. He bent closer across the rope barrier for a better look, but there was nothing to explain his assignment. He'd hardly expected a jeweled tail, for example; yet there must be some reason for the proposed theft.

Almost at once a uniformed guard appeared and called out, "Not too close there, mister. Them things are delicate!"

"Sorry. Just wanted a good look. Know where these bones came from?"

The guard moved closer, friendly now. "Out west somewhere. It tells on the sign. In most of these skeletons we have to use some fake bones. It's impossible to find one of these things complete."

Nick nodded and turned away, not wanting to show too much interest. "It sure was big," he said by way of conclusion, and drifted back to the Etruscan Wing.

He might have passed directly through to the Egyptian Room if he hadn't recognized a familiar face bent over one of the glass display cases. It was that of Lynn Peters, the girl he'd met at Kincaid's house. Her flushed cheeks and sandy hair were unmistakable, even if she was not wearing her riding costume.

"Hello there," he said. "I believe we met yesterday after the horse trials."

She turned, the fresh young smile coming naturally to her face. "Oh, it's Mr. Velvet, isn't it? I had a nice chat with your wife last evening."

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"Gloria's just a friend," he corrected her amiably. "But what brings you here? I don't see a single horse in the whole place. Not a live one, anyway."

"They're having a special exhibit of antique jewelry, including some pieces from ancient Egypt." She led him to a nearby case filled with what looked to him like beaded trinkets. "That necklace of gold and jasper and amethyst is from the twelfth dynasty—two thousand years B.C.! Can you imagine?"

She seemed genuinely excited by the necklace, and Nick had to pretend a mild interest. Almost at once he noticed another guard, watching them from a high balcony that ran around the room. "This place is alive with guards, isn't it? Don't they trust anyone?"

Lynn Peters brushed the long hair from her eyes. "They've had some trouble—a number of robberies during the past couple of years. The latest one, a few months back, was the last straw, I guess. Someone stole the famous Pliny diamond, one of several brought from India to Rome about the year 60 A.D., and described by Pliny in his writings."

Nick grunted, vaguely remembering having read something about the robbery in the papers. "I don't know much Roman history, but I always thought Pliny was a politician of some sort."

"Pliny the Younger was, but his father was a naturalist. He wrote a thirty-seven-volume *Natural History*, which still survives. The diamond that bears his name is a really fabulous stone, almost priceless. Though of course it doesn't have the brilliancy of modern gems."

"Why is that?"

"The art of lapidary wasn't fully developed until the middle years of the Eighteenth Century—around 1746, to be exact. Before that, very little was known about the faceting of diamonds to give them the sparkle and brilliance we know today."

"You speak like a true authority."

She smiled at the compliment. "I'm studying to be a lapidarist. I work at the diamond exchange on West Forty-seventh Street."

"An unusual occupation for a young lady."

The grin turned impish. "Did you think I spent my life falling off horses?"

"Hardly." He was watching the guard on the balcony. "Just what happened to this Pliny diamond?"

"It was stolen from one of these showcases, just as other

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jewelry had been earlier. An alarm sounded when the glass was broken, of course, but by the time the guards got here there was no sign of the thief. Each of the thefts happened during the daytime hours, which is why they now have a guard assigned to every room. At night they have an elaborate alarm system, and two guard dogs patrol the place." She chuckled at the thought. "I always imagine the dogs carrying off the dinosaur bones and burying them somewhere."

"That stolen diamond would be difficult to dispose of, wouldn't it?"

"Not if it was cut up and refaceted. Pieces of a necklace from a similar robbery turned up with a fence in Boston. Museum robberies have been quite a problem around New York ever since the Star of India was stolen from the Museum of Natural History back in 1964."

Nick nodded. The watching guard made him nervous, and he didn't know how far their voices might carry in this high-ceilinged room. "Look," he decided suddenly, "I have to be going. Can I drop you anywhere?"

She shook her head. "This is part of my homework."

"Is this Egyptian stuff valuable, too?"

Lynn shrugged. "Depends on what you mean by valuable. To a collector it would be priceless, though it's not the sort of thing a fence would care to handle."

He nodded and started for the door. "I'll see you around. Don't fall off any more horses!"

Each time Nick Velvet was handed an assignment like this he reminded himself of the Clouded Tiger affair, some years back. In that one he'd been hired to steal a tiger from a zoo and it turned out to be only a means of drawing attention from the real crime being committed at the same time. The same trick had been tried with Nick on other occasions too, but he was usually able to see through the ruse and bow out in time. He didn't like being played for a patsy, and he had a suspicion that Frader Kincaid was trying to do just that.

No man, Nick felt, not even a dinosaur enthusiast, could have any use for the bones from a Tyrannosaurus tail. It seemed much more likely that Kincaid was connected with the museum thefts, and that he was using Nick simply to get by the added security precautions so he could enter the museum behind him and pull off another jewel robbery.

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It made sense, in a way, and it might even explain why Lynn Peters had been at the museum. She might be working with Kincaid, watching Nick to see when he would pull the job. She might even be the lapidarist who cut up the gems for Kincaid after the robberies.

Thinking about it, Nick turned his car north and headed toward Kincaid's big house on the hill. He wanted another chat with the man before he undertook the theft of the dinosaur's tail.

When he reached it in mid-afternoon the big house was quiet. It was possible that Kincaid was in the city, but the elaborate study had indicated he did much of his work at home.

Nick was in luck. Kincaid himself answered the door on the second ring. "Well, Mr. Velvet! Don't tell me you're bringing the tail to me already!"

"No, not quite."

"Well, come in for a drink, anyway. I was just dictating some business correspondence on my machine, but I always welcome a little break. This big place gets lonely."

"That was quite a party last evening. We enjoyed it."

"My pleasure! Who would have thought that fate would bring you to me at the very moment I needed your services?" He led Nick into the study and opened a well-stocked liquor cabinet. "Is Scotch satisfactory?"

"Fine."

"What brings you here? Are there any complications?"

"Somewhat. The number of guards at the museum has been increased considerably since a recent string of thefts."

"That should present no problem to a man of your skill, Mr. Velvet."

"It doesn't, really." He accepted the drink and took a sip. It was good Scotch. Expensive. "But as you know, I never steal things of value, like cash or jewelry. Nor do I allow myself to be used as a decoy for such thefts."

Kincaid smiled indulgently. "But, Mr. Velvet, by the very nature of your chosen calling you invite people to take advantage of you. After all, what truly valueless object would be worth your fee of $20,000, even to an eccentric like myself?"

"Then you admit you haven't told me the whole truth?"

"What other explanation could there be?"

"Some jewels have already been stolen from that museum, and more are on exhibit now. You could be using me only to

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provide access or diversion while your own gang carries out the real theft."

"Gang, gang! Mr. Velvet, I'm a businessman, a publisher. I don't have any gang!"

"Then why do you really want the dinosaur's tail?"

Kincaid sighed and put down his drink. "Come with me, Mr. Velvet. I'm going to show you something very few people have ever seen."

Nick followed him across the study to a small door that might have led to a closet. Surprisingly, it opened to reveal a narrow staircase to the basement. In that moment, descending toward the unknown, Nick's first thought was of a velvet-lined chamber where Kincaid might act out the orgies of his pornographic books. Then he remembered a story he'd real as a boy—about a man who bred giant ants, and he wondered if some living creature from the distant past might be awaiting him in Frader Kincaid's basement.

The first thing he saw as Kincaid snapped on the lights did nothing to relieve his mind. Nick had paused only inches from the gaping jaws of a dinosaur's skull. He jerked back quickly and looked around. The entire basement workroom was filled with bones—skulls, ribs, shinbones, jawbones. They hung from the ceiling and they littered the rows of shelves that circled the room.

"What in hell is this?" Nick asked.

Frader Kincaid smiled at his reaction. "My hobby, my avocation. I told you last evening of my great interest in prehistoric creatures. Here I find a way to enjoy that interest and even make a little money out of it." He took down one of the jawbones and handed it to Nick. "This particular one is carved from wood and, as you see, highly polished. But I have others of molded plastic and even of bone. Bones made out of bone!"

"You *make* these? But what for?"

"I sell them to museums. A complete skeleton of a prehistoric reptile or mammal is very hard to come by. Many museums, especially the smaller ones, often possess only a few bones from a Mammoth or a Brontosaurus. They want to reconstruct a complete skeleton, and the only way to do it is to use a number of artificial bones. That's where I come in."

"Amazing," was all Nick could say.

"I can furnish a single bone or a dozen. Generally I go right to the museum and work on the skeleton myself, fitting the

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missing bones in place. They close off the room for a time, and I do my work."

"Are there many New York museums that do this sort of thing?"

"All of them use reproductions in one form or another. I suppose the largest must be the giant blue whale at the American Museum of Natural History. Many people viewing it believe that it's stuffed, but actually it's a complete reproduction, carefully formed in every detail. I don't work on anything that complex, though. I stick to bones."

"And you need the tail of the Tyrannosaurus to serve as a model?"

"Of course! I must have it, and soon."

Nick Velvet sighed and avoided the gaping jaws. "All right," he said at last. "I'll steal it for you."

"I'd be most grateful," Kincaid said with a smile, and led the way upstairs.

Nick spent Tuesday morning checking out one more point, just to ease his mind. The Egyptian jewelry on display at the museum had little market value. It was not to be compared with the Pliny diamond and other stolen pieces. Nick now felt certain that he'd been wrong in suspecting another jewel robbery.

When the museum closed its doors at six o'clock, Nick was still inside. He'd already decided that the theft must take place after hours, despite the alarm system and the dogs. The daytime guards in all the rooms were obstacles he could not safely overcome. A quick test had shown him that they were quite professional and not the sort to be diverted by firecrackers or an escaped mouse. Besides, Nick estimated he would need at least two or three minutes to cut through the wires that held the tail bones in place. So it had to be at night.

When the guard in the Egyptian Room turned away for an instant at the sound of the closing buzzer, Nick had simply stepped into one of the large upright sarcophagi against one wall and pulled the lid almost shut. The guard passed once, glancing around, but apparently assumed that Nick had left by the other exit. He flicked off the light switch and Nick was alone in his own dark tomb. The sarcophagus was far from comfortable, being a bit shorter than Nick's six feet, but he knew he would have to remain inside for at least an hour.

Through the crack in the lid

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he watched the dusky remains of daylight filter through the overhead skylight until the Egyptian Room settled into total darkness. Then at last it was night, and he slipped from his cramped hiding place to move silently through the darkened halls. It was easy to spot the electric eye alarms in each doorway, and just as easy to avoid them by bending very low. They would have trapped only the most amateur of thieves. He entered the Etruscan Wing and crossed the marble floor toward the Hall of Great Reptiles. So far, all was well.

Then he froze, hearing a guard's voice far off, echoing through the lonely building. It was answered by the barking of a dog. Nick listened and moved a bit faster.

Avoiding the electric eye at the entrance to the Hall of Great Reptiles, he made his way toward the enormous white skeleton in the center of the room. He took a moment to shine his narrow-beam flashlight at the walls, but there was nothing except the tall dusty display cases filled with fossils and petrified footprints from ages ago. He wondered why he'd done that and then realized there was something wrong. It was—what?—a feeling that he was not alone here?

He tensed his body, but no sound came. Then he allowed the flashlight to return to its target on the dinosaur's bony tail. He went under the rope and clamped the flashlight to his left wrist, leaving both hands free. As he had assumed, the individual bones were strongly wired together, but a few quick snips with his wire cutters should free them.

The ominous feeling came again, and this time he knew that someone else was in the room. He raised his left arm slightly, until the flashlight beam targeted a black-clad figure crouched like a cat some ten feet in front of him. Despite the black knit cap that covered her sandy hair, he had no trouble recognizing Lynn Peters.

"What in hell are you doing here?" he whispered harshly.

"The same thing as you," she said with a grin, sliding closer across the polished floor. "You hid somewhere after the place closed, so I did the same thing."

"But—you mean you've been following me?"

"Of course. You're the famous thief Nick Velvet, aren't you?"

"Where did you hide?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"In the Ladies' Room. The male guards never think to

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check it. I had this black outfit on under my raincoat, just in case. You're after the jewelry, aren't you?"

He shifted the light from her face and brought out his wire cutters. "No, I think that's your game. If you really knew anything about me, you'd know I don't steal anything valuable."

"But you're working for Kincaid," she insisted.

"I have what I want right here." He snipped away at the wires, carefully disengaging about fifteen inches of the tail section. The bones felt zero-cold in his hands.

Then suddenly they heard voices nearby, and the barking of a dog. "Come on," Nick snapped. "We've got to get out of here."

"What are you doing with those bones?"

"Stealing them." He grabbed her arm.

"But the jewelry—"

"No time for your jewels now. If those guard dogs catch our scent we're in trouble—big trouble."

He led her back through the Etruscan Wing, grasping her wrist with one hand and the dinosaur's tail with the other. The voices seemed farther off, and for a moment he relaxed, certain they were going to make it.

"Duck under here," he warned. "It's an electric eye."

She ducked, but not low enough. Instantly a clanging alarm bell shattered the silence. "Damn!"

"I'm sorry."

He tugged her and broke into a run. "A fine burglar you'd make!"

"I never pretended to be one."

"Then what in hell are you doing here?"

There were shouts and running footsteps now, and up ahead the lights were going on. "Nick, I'm scared!" she cried as the barking of the dogs sounded closer.

"You should be. Right now I'm scared myself."

They had reached the main hall of the museum, and the front exit was only a hundred feet away. But already they could see the guards converging. Someone spotted them, shouted to the others, and more lights came on.

"Run!" Nick told her.

Their running footsteps echoed on the polished marble as they retreated toward the Egyptian Room. He remembered the mummy cases, but knew the dogs would sniff them out in a minute.

"There's no way out, Nick."

Ahead, appearing suddenly like some hound of hell, a large German shepherd blocked their

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path. Nick reversed direction, dragging Lynn with him.

"I—I can't—"

The dog started after them, so close they could hear its panting as it ran. "I know just how Sir Henry Baskerville must have felt," Nick gasped.

"We can't make it," Lynn moaned.

Nick slid to a sudden stop and pulled a handful of capsules from his pocket. The dog was only twenty feet away, coming fast, as Nick hurled the capsules to the floor, breaking them.

"What's that?" Lynn asked.

The dog slowed its charge, turning its nose to the floor. "Come on! That'll only divert him for a minute or two."

"But what—?"

"It's a chemical that looks like blood and has a strong meat scent. Fishermen use it to attract good catches. I thought it might distract the dogs for a minute if I got into a jam."

The German shepherd had paused, sniffing, but already it was losing interest in this new odor. It turned again toward them. "Now what, Nick? I can't run any more."

"There they are!" a guard shouted from the corridor ahead of them.

Nick sighed and braced himself. "Through the window. It's our only chance."

"The window!"

"We're on the first floor. It's no worse than falling off a horse."

Ten minutes later, bruised, cut, and out of breath, they sat in the front seat of Nick's car as he pursued a winding route through upper Manhattan.

"Do you always cut things that close?" she asked him.

He tried a relaxed smile, and it didn't feel bad at all. There was a glass cut along one cheek, but it wasn't deep. "Not usually. I hadn't counted on your being there. What about your car?"

"I parked it a few blocks away, just in case. But they'll find my raincoat in the Ladies' Room."

"Any identification in it?"

"No." She grinned at a sudden thought. "My, won't they be surprised when they discover the only thing missing is the dinosaur's tail!"

"Sorry you didn't have time for the jewels."

"Look, Nick—Mr. Velvet—I was only there because you were, the same as yesterday. I thought Kincaid hired you to steal that jewelry."

He took one hand from the steering wheel to rub a bruise on his arm. "But why would you care anyway, unless you were after the jewelry yourself?"

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"Those things aren't worth much in the open market, but the diamonds that were already stolen are worth a fortune. There's a $5,000 reward for the Pliny diamond alone, and I mean to collect it."

"You mean you're—?"

She nodded. "Not a lapidarist at all, but an insurance investigator. Sorry to disappoint you."

"But what about the horses and the jumping?"

"I joined the group recently, to get close to Kincaid. I'm not much of a horsewoman—that's why I fell on Sunday. You see, Kincaid was doing some work at the museum the same day the Pliny diamond was stolen. The insurance companies are suspicious of him."

"He makes bones," Nick explained. "For dinosaurs. That's what he was doing at the museum."

"Maybe that's just a cover."

Nick ran his fingers over the length of tail bone at his side. "We'll find out soon enough. We're going to Kincaid's place."

The lights were still burning when they reached the house on the hill, and Kincaid greeted them at the door. He couldn't quite mask his surprise, though, at seeing Lynn. "Well, hello. I thought you two barely knew each other."

"We've gotten friendly," Lynn explained. "We've been through a lot together."

But Kincaid's eyes were on the length of wired bone that Nick carried in his left hand. "You did it! You stole the Tyrannosaurus tail!"

"I did it," Nick agreed.

"Splendid, splendid! This calls for a drink while I get you the rest of your money."

Nick accepted the bundle of bills and stuffed it into his pocket without counting. By now he was used to payments in cash, and it felt like the right amount. "I should tell you that Miss Peters here is an insurance investigator. If you're wise, you won't carry out your scheme to recover the Pliny diamond."

Kincaid's face went white. "What are you talking about?"

Nick saw that Lynn was listening intently, so he hurried on. "You do work for the museum. Surely they would have allowed you to take a plaster cast of the tail bones for your models. No, Mr. Kincaid, you didn't pay me $20,000 because you wanted to have the tail, but rather because you wanted the museum *not* to have it. I asked myself what they'd do without this tail segment, and the answer was obvious. They'd hire you to replace it with a reproduction."

Kincaid lowered his eyes.

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"You're right. I needed the work."

"Enough to pay me $20,000 so you could get a job worth maybe a few hundred? I think not. But you were working in the museum on the day the Pliny diamond was stolen. And that started me thinking. You said yourself that when you fitted an artificial bone they usually closed off that room of the museum while you did your work. That means, at least for a brief period, the guard would probably be removed—or he wouldn't be watching you too closely. The jewelry at the museum now isn't worth your trouble, but suppose the Pliny never left the building. Suppose you simply broke the display case, removed the Pliny and hid it somewhere. Somewhere, say, in the Hall of Great Reptiles."

"That's crazy!"

"Is it? You couldn't risk carrying it out of the building on your person with alarm bells ringing all around, but you could hide and return for it later—a week or a month later, if necessary. But what happened after the Pliny diamond was stolen? The museum tightened its security by placing a guard in every room. The Pliny was still there, safer now than ever, except that the museum didn't know it."

"Of course!" Lynn Peters breathed at his side. "That would explain everything."

Nick nodded. "It would certainly explain why you were so pleased to see me on Sunday, Kincaid. You knew I couldn't be hired to steal the diamond for you, but if I could steal part of the dinosaur, the museum would ask you to come down and fix it. Alone in that room you could retrieve the Pliny from its hiding place."

"You'll never convince anyone of that story, Velvet."

"I've convinced Miss Peters already, and I'm sure she'll be able to convince the museum officials. You were growing nervous and wanted me to steal the tail soon, which means the hiding place isn't too safe. I think a search of the room will turn it up quickly."

Kincaid bit his lip and looked from one to the other. "I have money. I'll pay you both well."

"I already have my pay from you," Nick said.

"A deal?"

"That's up to Miss Peters now. But if you tell us exactly where the Pliny is, I think she'd allow you enough time to catch a morning flight to South America."

"South—"

"They must read dirty books down there, too. You could start a whole new life."

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Kincaid made a sudden motion toward the desk, but Nick stopped him. "No guns, please. Nothing like that."

"Where's the Pliny?" Lynn demanded.

He stared at the carpeted floor for a long moment before he answered. Then he said, so softly that they could hardly hear, "On top of one of those tall display cases along the wall. I just threw it up there. The cases are so dusty I knew they were rarely cleaned or even examined."

They left him in his house on the hill, and as they drove away Lynn asked, "Is your work always this much fun?"

"Sometimes. When there's somebody like you along."

"What are you thinking about right now?"

He turned to her and grinned. "You know, in a sense that damned dinosaur had a jeweled tail after all."

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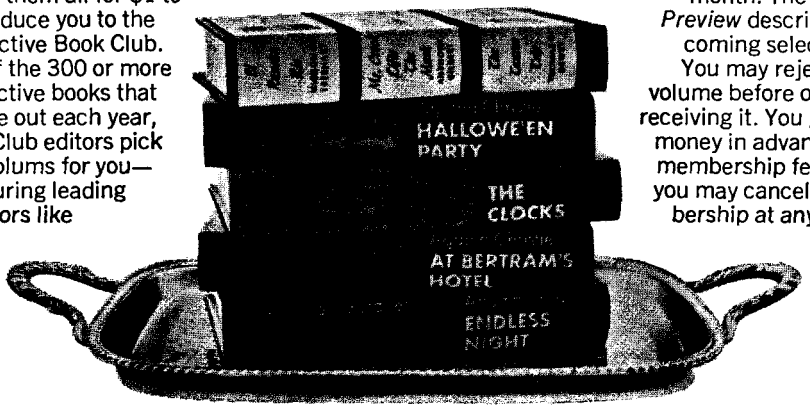

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